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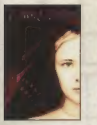

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COVER: Harry Potter painting by Joel Spector. RIGHT: Castaway toys are the subject matter of Brom's illustrated novel, *The Plucker*. See story on page 82. BELOW: Harry Potter returns to theaters November 18th. See story on page 16.

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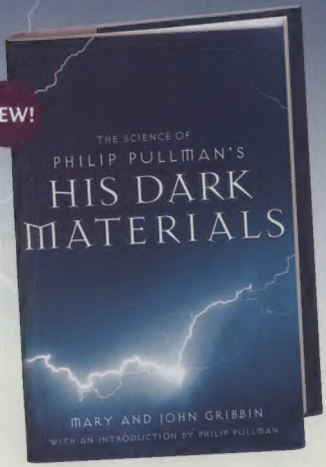

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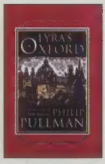

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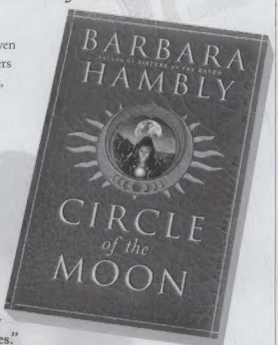

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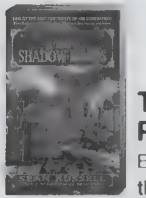

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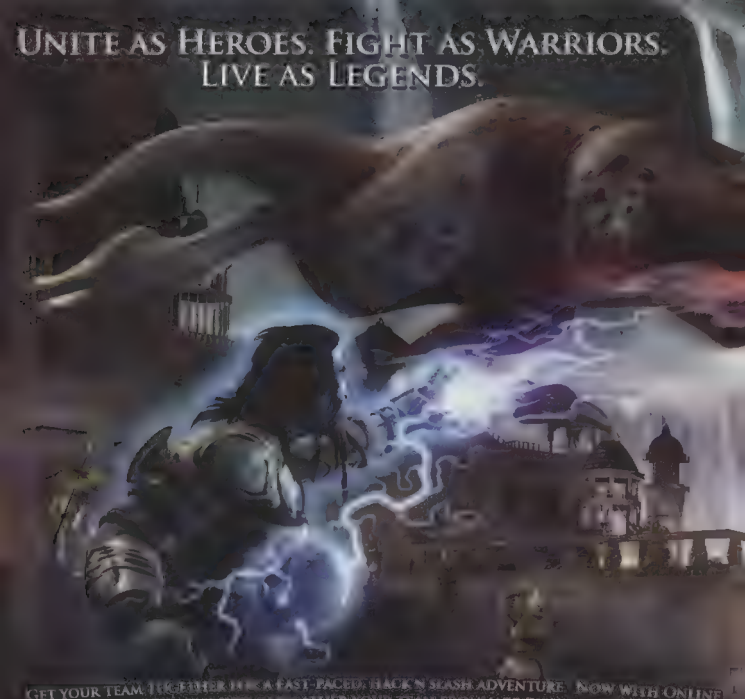

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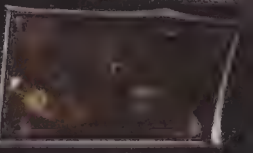

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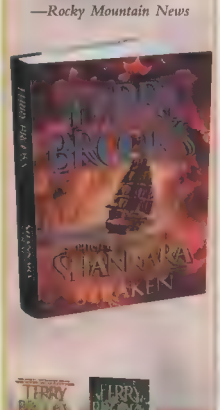

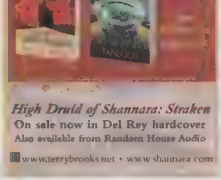

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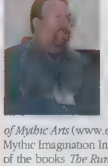

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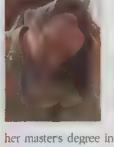
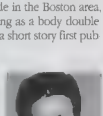


PATRICK SAMPHIRE lives in Yorkshire, England, with his wife Stephanie Burgis, and their border collie, Nika. He works as a university Webmaster and administrator. His stories have appeared in *Realms of Fantasy, Strange Horizons,* and *The Third Alternative*, among other places. He has recently been working on several children's novels set in the same town as his *Realms of Fantasy* story *Crab Apple*. You can visit his Web site at: www.patricksamphire.co.uk

JANE YOLEN was born and raised in New York City, and now lives in Hatfield, Massachusetts. She attended Smith College and received her master's degree in education from the University of Massachusetts. The distinguished author of more than 170 books, Jane Yolen is a person of many talents. When she is not writing, Yolen composes songs, is a professional storyteller on the stage, and is the busy wife of a university professor, the mother of three grown children, and a grandmother.

RESA NELSON is a freelance writer and a Clarion '85 graduate. Her fiction has been published in *Science Fiction Age, Aboriginal Science Fiction,* and several anthologies. She acted as screenwriter and/or producer for three independent short films made in the Boston area, which gave her experience ranging from running a casting call to acting as a body double. Resa is currently writing a novel based on "The Dragonslayer's Sword," a short story first published in the premiere issue of *Science Fiction Age*.



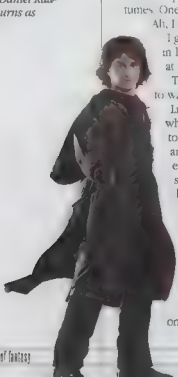
ERIC DINYER has worked in the entertainment, music, and publishing industries in a number of areas. His experience includes projects with Time-Warner Books, Columbia Records, Viking/Penguin, St. Martin's Press, Doubleday, and Scholastic. He has also worked with publications such as *Harper's, Newsweek,* and the *New York Times Book Review*. His work has been profiled in international design publications as diverse as the Seoul, South Korea-published *Design Net Magazine*, to the Sao Paulo, Brazil publication, *Grafica*. His work has been used in feature films such as *Shaft, Spiderman,* and *Freaky Friday*. Showtime networks based a thirty second television spot on eight of Dinyer's images for their *Sci-Fridays* series. Dinyer has created cover images for Bruce Springsteen and Sting, and has illustrated two books: *The Breathing Field: Meditations on Yoga,* and *Effort and Surrender: The Art and Wisdom of Yoga*.

THE CITY OF
SPLENDORS

By Resa Nelson

Harry Potter returns to the big screen in the *Goblet of Fire*.

ABOVE: Professors Dumbledore and Mad-Eye Moody confer with Harry
BELOW: Daniel Radcliffe returns as Harry



On the night of July 15 under a half-full moon and bright stars, I was startled by a handful of 14-year old boys who breezed past me in the parking lot

I did a double take. In the moonlight, I'd almost missed the fact that these teenage boys—boys I'd expect to be riding skateboards and looking oh-so-cool—were wearing odd, homemade costumes. One looked like he was wearing his mother's red bathrobe. Another carried a broom

Ah, I thought. It's Harry Potter night, and they're headed toward the bookstore up the hill

I glanced at my watch. It was only 9:30 on a Friday night. The boys were on their way to wait in line two and a half hours for *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*, which went on sale at midnight

That's when my heart pounded and my eyes misted. "A book," I said. "They're dressing up to wait for a book."

Like many, when I look at the response to J.K. Rowling's books, I think about what happened when Charles Dickens first published his novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in serial form. In Victorian England, book publishing was a dicey business. It was expensive to publish a book, and there was no guarantee it would sell well. However, there was a nifty solution for novelists. In order to avoid taxes, newspapers increased in size (which put them in a less expensive tax category), and editors suddenly needed to fill the extra space. They decided to publish novels by printing just a few chapters at a time. If readers didn't like the chapters, the newspaper simply stopped publishing installments of that novel. On the other hand, when readers liked the chapters, demand for the newspaper increased, the author could keep writing until the entire novel had been published, and everyone was happy. The most popular stories had chapters with cliffhanger endings. More than a hundred years later, the movie industry copied this idea and created short serial films, which ultimately inspired movies like the Indiana Jones franchise.

When Charles Dickens sold *The Old Curiosity Shop* in serial form, the newspaper published its chapters over the course of nearly a year. Toward the end, readers worried about one of the main characters, Little Nell. In January 1841, legend has it that thousands of people

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The Weasleys in the Muggle campground near the site of the International Quidditch Cup.

lined the docks in New York. They waited for the ships to come in, because the newspapers were first published in England, then shipped to the United States—anyone onboard a ship coming from England was bound to have read the latest installment of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. As a ship approached the crowded docks, people called out to those onboard before it landed, asking if Little Nell was dead. The answer was yes, and people wept openly in the streets.

This past summer, instead of lining the docks by the thousands, people took over bookstores late at night. Waiting lines spilled out the door and around the block.

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince received celebrity treatment. According to *Publisher's Weekly*, a signed copy arrived in New York on July 2 on the *Queen Mary 2*. It was packed inside a steamer trunk and met by an armored car. Over a thousand UPS trucks were equipped with a GPS tracking system to enforce security when they delivered copies to bookstores. Steve Riggio, the CEO of Barnes and Noble, predicted the chain would sell 50,000 copies per hour, stating, "No book has ever sold so many copies in so little time."

With Harry Potter mania growing as each new book is published, what's likely to happen when the film version of Book 4, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, is released on November 18 by Warner Brothers? Will teenage boys wearing bathrobes and carrying broomsticks wait in line to see a movie for as many hours as they did to buy a book?

Possibly, considering that each movie takes care to be loyal to the author's words.

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire begins ominously by following Frank Bryce, an elderly gardener who still tends the grounds of the empty home once inhabited by Tom Riddle and his parents, even though the Riddles dropped dead of natural causes one night many years ago. Although Tom Riddle was once a promising student at Hogwarts, he's since become Lord Voldemort, an evil wizard who has been in ethereal form since the day 13 years ago, that he first tried to kill Harry Potter. (Fans who saw an advance showing reported to AintItCoolNews.com that another character appears in this early scene—a key character who doesn't show up until much later in the novel.)

Voldemort has killed Bertha Jorkins of the Ministry of Magic after gleaning information from her and formulating a new plan with his servant Wormtail in the Riddles' empty house. Frank unwittingly discovers Voldemort and Wormtail and soon meets his demise.

At the same time, Harry (played by Daniel Radcliffe) wakes up miles away in his own bed with the scar on his forehead burning. Harry has learned that this means Voldemort is nearby. Worried, he sends off a quick letter via his owl Hedwig to his guardian Sirius (played by Gary Oldman), who's gone to a tropical place in hiding since being freed from Azkaban Prison.

Before the new school year begins, Harry is whisked away by his friend Ron's family, the Weasleys. He soon learns the World Quidditch Cup is taking place in England—for the first time in 30 years. Using everyday objects that have been turned into Portkeys, wizards and witches teleport from all over Great Britain to a seldom-used camping ground. This is where the World Quidditch Cup is held, far from curious Muggle eyes. The Weasleys take Harry to the event as their guest, and several odd things happen.

The most disturbing event begins when several hooded wizards cause a riot as they torment the Muggle campground owners by making them float in the air. Harry and his friends Ron (played by Rupert Grint) and Hermione (played by Emma Watson) hear

Maggie Smith returns for her fourth appearance as Professor McGonagall.

Hermione advises Harry he must not have contact [illegible] which [illegible] the Dark Lord, competition.

someone casting a spell, and they see the image of a skull climb into the night sky. Adults scream when they see it. This is the Dark Mark of Lord Voldemort, a sign that beckons his followers, the Death Eaters, to his side. It was the Death Eaters who caused the

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Only the older students may submit their names into the Goblet of Fire for the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Dumbledore's age line spell keeps the younger ones out.

riot, and now they flee in terror

Harry learns the Death Eaters stayed out of prison many years ago by lying about their involvement with Lord Voldemort. Because they betrayed him, they're terrified by the possibility of his return—that's why they ran away when the Dark Mark appeared. Ironically, only Death Eaters know how to conjure a Dark Mark.

Every year Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry ends up hiring a new teacher for the Defense Against the Dark Arts. This year it's Mad-Eye Moody (played by Brendan Gleeson of *Troy* and *The Village*), a badly scarred man with one normal eye and another that seems to have a life of its own, seemingly seeing everywhere at once. He's a former Auror—a Dark Wizard catcher—who earned his battle scars as a result of sending wrong-doing wizards to prison. But before school begins, there's a report of someone trying to break into Moody's house.

In Rowling's novel, Hermione ponders the rights of elves, horrified to learn that Hogwarts has a hundred of its own house elves, all unpaid for their labor. She goes so far as to form an organization dedicated to the rights of house elves: the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare (SPEW). Rumor has it that house elves are few and far between in the movie. Considering that the novel is well over 700 pages, it's not surprising the elves were probably kicked out of the picture before they had a chance to hit the cutting room floor.

Harry and Ron are disappointed to learn there won't be an Inter-House Quidditch Cup at Hogwarts this year. Instead, Hogwarts will host the revival of a 700-year-old competition held once every five years: the Triwizard Tournament. Hogwarts is one of the three largest European wizardry schools, along with the Durmstrang school of Bulgaria and the Beauxbatons school of France. One champion will be selected from each school to compete in three magical tasks.

Although the Triwizard Tournament was discontinued for several years due to a high death toll of champions, Hogwarts' Professor Dumbledore (played for the second time by Michael Gambon, who replaced Richard Harris in the previous film) assures students that officials have worked hard over the summer to make sure no one will be endangered this time.

At the same time, Dumbledore warns students that competing in the Triwizard Tournament is not a task to be entered lightly. He says, "Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have become a champion. Please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you drop your name into the goblet."

Once the French and Bulgarian delegations arrive, a wooden goblet brimming with flames is placed on display at Hogwarts. Students write their names on parchment and put it in the fire to be considered as their school's champion. Because the tournament tasks are difficult and dangerous, there's an age limit. No student under 17 may place a name in the cup.

Harry is disappointed. At 14, he's far too young to enter his name in the goblet of fire.

At the same time, fortune-telling Professor Trelawney says to Harry, "I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass ..."

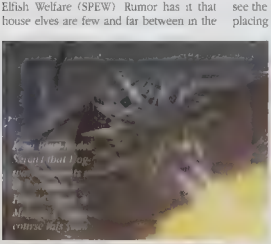
Harry believes Professor Trelawney's fortune telling is nothing more than guesswork and a spooky façade ... except for the end of last school year when she predicted Lord Voldemort would rise again. That's what Harry dreads, and he has a bad feeling it's bound to happen.

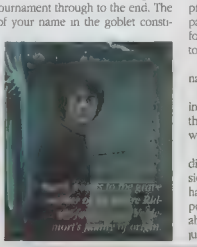
The goblet announces the Triwizard champions by spitting out the charred pieces of parchment bearing their names: Victor Krum for Durmstrang, Fleur Delacour for Beauxbatons, and Cedric Diggory for Hogwarts.

Suddenly, the goblet spits out one more name: Harry Potter.

It's impossible. Harry didn't enter his name in the goblet. Even if he'd tried, the age spell that Dumbledore cast around the goblet would have prevented it.

In an interview with *Empire* magazine, director Mike Newell said of the movie version, "It's a classic paranoid thriller. What you have is a story at the beginning of which the powers of evil have a plan, which is absolutely not revealed to your hero. The kid just wanders into another year at school, then





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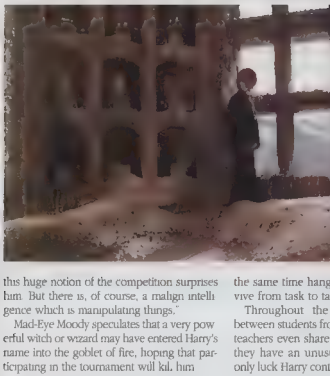

this huge notion of the competition surprises him. But there is, of course, a malign intelligence which is manipulating things."

Mad-Eye Moody speculates that a very powerful witch or wizard may have entered Harry's name into the goblet of fire, hoping that participating in the tournament will kill him.

Harry suspects Lord Voldemort. Logically, Harry knows Voldemort is in a feeble and powerless state. He's rumored to be hiding in a foreign country. And yet, Harry can't help but remember the way his scar burned one summer morning, warning him about Voldemort.

Sirius is worried, too. He slips back to Britain from his self-imposed hiding, putting himself at risk because he's concerned about Harry.

But nearly everyone else thinks Harry found a way to break the rules and put his name in the goblet of fire himself. When Harry protests his innocence, few listen or take him seriously. Harry's so frustrated that it takes his friendship with his best friend Ron to the breaking point, although they eventually reconcile.

Throughout the school year at Hogwarts, the champions—Viktor, Fleur, Cedric, and Harry—face their three challenges in the Triwizard Tournament.

Determined to help Harry, his Care of Magical Creatures teacher and friend Hagrid (played by Robbie Coltrane) gives Harry a preview of what he'll face in the first task: a dragon. Perhaps because Harry is too young to be competing—but bound to do so—various people give hints that help him figure out how to handle such a task.

When Harry realizes that two of the other three champions, Viktor and Fleur, have probably also had a sneak peak, Harry decides the only fair thing to do is give the last champion, Cedric, as much information as the others have to level the playing field.

Even though Harry is convinced he's doing the right thing, that decision comes back to haunt him later in the school year, when Cho, the girl Harry likes, goes to the Christmas Yule Ball as Cedric's date. As Harry faces each task in the tournament, he must make a new moral decision while at the same time hanging on by thread to survive from task to task.

Throughout the year, romance arises between students from different schools. Two teachers even share romance when they see they have an unusual bond. However, the only luck Harry continues to have is bad luck.

Sirius warns Harry that Professor Karkaroff of the Durmstrang school was once a Death Eater, one of Voldemort's followers. Years ago, Mad-Eye Moody captured Karkaroff and sent him to prison. Karkaroff managed to free himself by making a deal with the Ministry of Magic, and he's now employed as the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Durmstrang. Sirius believes it was Karkaroff who put Harry's name in the goblet of fire, and he warns Harry to keep an eye on Viktor, the Durmstrang champion in the Triwizard Tournament.

Another new character, reporter Rita Skeeter (played by Miranda Richardson of *The Phantom of the Opera* and *The Hours*), wreaks havoc by writing outrageous articles that read more like fiction than fact. Even worse, she seems to have infiltrated Hogwarts somehow—even though no one can figure out how she's doing it. The role of Rita Skeeter is also rumored to be reduced but still potent in the movie version.

In another turn of events, the Ministry of Magic's Barty Crouch—who's supposed to be a tournament judge—mysteriously goes missing.

By the time the third and final task of the tournament ends, Lord Voldemort (played by Ralph Fiennes of *Schindler's List* and *The Constant Gardner*) returns to physical form, more secrets are revealed, and the mysteries are solved.

Unfortunately, Dumbledore's dire warning was not in vain. Despite every effort to make the tournament safer, one of the champions dies during the third task. Along with violence and disturbing images, this is probably why *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* is the first movie in the series to earn a PG-13 rating.

In an interview with *Sci Fi Wire*, producer David Heyman said, "I look forward to the three tasks, and I'm particularly looking forward to the unexpected task. It'll be a really funny film. I think that it'll also work as a thriller. And Lord Voldemort is back."

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, director Mike Newell said, "I wanted Voldemort to be a tremendously charismatic man, and Ralph has tremendous charisma. I wanted to have someone who was entirely cold in his heart, and I knew Ralph could do that very well from *Schindler's List*."

Newell explained it took 12 drafts of the screenplay to whittle the story down so it would fit into one movie. He cited that the "rambling" narrative readers enjoy can't possibly translate directly to the screen. "There was great angst not only about what one took out but how you gave it form," he said.

Years ago, Newell was offered the opportunity to direct the first movie in the series, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, but he turned it down because he was committed to working on another movie at the time. He was conflicted. On one hand, he'd read the first Harry Potter novel and described it as "marvelous." On the other hand, he knew it would require an enormous amount of CG effects. Newell is known for movies like *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and he felt daunted by the thought of not only shooting a movie requiring many effects but the huge task of realizing the vision of Potter's world on screen. Ultimately, Newell passed, and the job went to Chris Columbus.

But for Newell, it's just as well he waited to direct the fourth Harry Potter movie. He relished the notion of taking the movie franchise out of the "Goody Two-Shoes" realm and into something much darker. As the franchise's first British director, Newell understands the intricacies of school life in England. "It's my view that children are violent, dirty, corrupt anarchists. Just adults in-waiting." With that thought in mind, Newell pushed his young actors to roll up their sleeves and really go for it in their fight scenes. It's fitting, considering that the books indicate this series is heading into the territory of all-out war.

Thanks to Rowling, we now live in a world where bookstores throw costume parties to celebrate and sell a book, and every rentable owl gets a night's work. Within the first 24 hours of its release, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* sold 6.9 million copies. The first three movies alone have garnered $2.6 billion around the world.

With the fourth Harry Potter movie released and the sixth book in print, Rowling's saga is bound to end within the next few years. But it gives us an inkling of why people waited on the New York docks nearly 200 years ago, anxious to learn the fate of an imaginary little girl created by Charles Dickens.

It's likely that hundreds of years from now, people will read about the Harry Potter rage in their history books. For their sake, let's hope there is a Dickens or a Rowling in their future.

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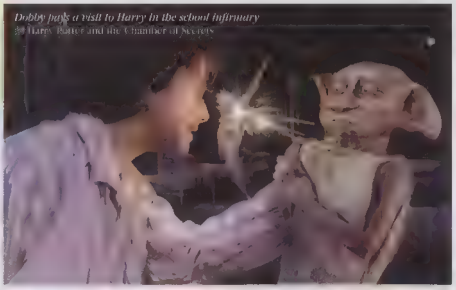

Dobby pays a visit to Harry in the school infirmary in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

If you haven't seen the first three Harry Potter movies—or if you don't have a photographic memory—here is a summary of the first three films and the story so far

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (2001) begins when Professors Dumbledore (played by Richard Harris) and McGonagall (played by Maggie Smith) arrive on Privet Drive Groundskeeper Hagrid (played by Robbie Coltrane) zooms from the air on a flying motorcycle with the infant Harry Potter in his arms. They place the infant on the doorstep of the Dursleys Harry's aunt, uncle, and cousin

Years later, we find Harry as a boy reduced to living a fairy-tale existence. he's an orphan forced to live in the small space under the Dursley's stairway They ignore him while doting on his cousin Dudley But one day they allow Harry to go to the zoo with them Harry discovers he can talk to a snake in the reptile house that inexplicably escapes, pausing to say "Thanksss" to Harry on its way out

On Harry's eleventh birthday, Hagrid returns and reveals that Harry is a wizard and has been invited to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Leaving the Dursleys behind, Harry enters a whole new world at Hogwarts, a vision created by author J.K Rowling and realized on screen by director Chris Columbus

When Harry buys his first wand he learns it contains a phoenix feather. Only one other wand was made with a feather from that same phoenix, and it's a wand used by Lord Voldemort, otherwise known as He Who Must Not Be Named Harry learns Voldemort killed his parents ten years ago and tried to kill Harry, too Voldemort is an evil wizard who's murdered everyone who opposed him, except for Harry The power from Voldemort's wand left a scar on Harry's forehead in the shape of a lightning bolt. Most people believe Voldemort is dead, although some think his spirit still lingers

Harry, Hermione, and Ron [illegible] Pumpkin Patch of Gigantitude.

A [illegible] and friends from Harry Potter and the [illegible]

When he learns how to ride a broom, Harry's soon recruited to play for Gryffindor's Quidditch team, a game similar to basketball and soccer but played while flying in the air

Although Harry finds fast friendship with fellow Gryffindor housemate Ron Weasley (played by Rupert Grint), they get off to a rocky start by hurting the feelings of Hermione (played by Emma Watson) When Professor Quirrel, who teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts (played by Ian Hart), bursts into the Hogwarts dining room and hysterically announces there's a troll on the loose, Harry and Ron realize they must find Hermione, who's rumored to be crying in the girl's bathroom. After they save her, Hermione protects them from being punished by taking the blame, and the three cement their friendship.

Kenneth Branagh stars as Hogwarts' Professor of the Dark Arts, Gilderoy Lockhart

At the same time, Harry also manages to cement a mutual dislike with Draco Malfoy, a fellow student and snob

After stumbling upon many strange things happening at Hogwarts, they learn that Hogwarts is protecting the sorcerer's stone, which gives immortality Harry suspects Professor Snape (played by Alan Rickman) of trying to steal the sorcerer's stone so he can give it to Voldemort

The friends make their way past a gigantic three-headed guard dog named Fluffy, vines like boa constrictors, flying keys, and a potentially lethal game of chess Only Harry proceeds to discover the real culprit is Professor Quirrel, whom Lord Voldemort inhabits like a parasite If Voldemort can get the stone, he can regain his own physical form again, but Harry saves the day and Voldemort's spirit escapes.

As Hermione tells Harry, what really matters is friendship and bravery.

Continued on page 109

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Through the Doorway: Embarking on a Journey to Narnia

BY RESA NELSON

Years before J.K. Rowling was born, another Brit wrote a book series that sweeps its human characters into a magical fantasy world. Just as Rowling plans to write a total of seven Harry Potter novels, C.S. Lewis wrote seven books known as *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The second book in the series—*The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*—is scheduled for release as a live-action feature film on December 9 from Walt Disney Pictures and Walden Media.

While the Potter movies strive to mimic Rowlings' novels as closely as possible, Disney is taking a decidedly different and unique approach to filming the Narnia book.

Director Andrew Adamson (*Shrek, Shrek 2*) didn't want to make a film based on *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. Instead, he chose to make a movie based on his *memory* of the book, which he read as a child.

"As much as I loved the book, it wasn't until I talked to Andrew that I realized what this movie could actually be," says producer Mark Johnson (*Galaxy Quest, The Alamo*). "It was the imagination of a 9-year-old boy coupled with the words of C.S. Lewis. I understood immediately what he wanted to do.

"Andrew knows the look, the feel, the sound, the smell of the movie. He has a magical vision. He really forged something that is completely original and yet completely respectful to the underlying material."

As Johnson and two of the screenwriters, Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeeley (*The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*), explain, Lewis's books succeed in encouraging readers to use their imaginations, much like connecting dots on a page to reveal a picture. The filmmakers are connecting those dots.

"We talked about this in terms of Tolkien. Lewis's long time friend," Johnson says. "Tolkien is very descriptive and tells you what everything looks like, where C.S. Lewis writes in broad strokes. I remember the book being more vigorous and exciting. But, for example, the final battle is only a page and a half in the book. It's almost all done in third person. It's really a character saying, 'You should have been there. It was terrible.'"

Markus and McFeeley felt intimidated at first by the task of adapting Lewis's classic tale, but they soon got over it and embraced the challenge. "This book was big for us as kids," McFeeley says. "Chris and I grew up similarly, on opposite sides of the country. We both had it in our youth library. It was very much a touchstone for my reading in childhood."

"The way the books are written leaves just enough to the imagination that it really sucks a kid's mind into the world of Narnia," Markus says. "Unlike something like *Lord of the Rings*, which when I was a kid I tried to read—there were too many facts in there for my addled young brain. The Narnia series is incredibly good at making you a part of it and letting your young, developing imagination help along with the storytelling.

"If you read it as a kid and go back to it 20 years later, you think, 'Wow. There's much less here.' It's a weird thing. We were talking to Andrew about it. The desire is to make a movie of what you remember the book being as opposed to when you go back and read it and go, 'I filled in the blanks!'"

Set during World War II's Blitz in England, *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* is about the adventures of four siblings, Lucy, Edmund, Susan, and Peter Pevensie. To protect them from the bombings in London, their parents send the children to live in the massive country house of a mysterious professor. While playing near a wardrobe, the youngest girl discovers she can step through it into Narnia, a land of dwarfs, giants, centaurs, and talking animals. However, Narnia has fallen under the rule of an icy-white witch, Jadis, who has enslaved Narnia's people and brought a hundred years of winter. A prophecy foretells the coming of four children who will rescue Narnia's people and end Jadis's reign.

"Part of a writer's job is to tease out the story and character opportunities of what's threaded in the book without stepping on any toes and without betraying the really excellent essence of the original," Markus says. "None of us would be working on this if the original wasn't great. You have to expand on it while leaving it pure."

So could this be the beginning of a new seven-picture series? Possibly. For one thing, the filmmakers rave about the performances of the children who play the Pevensies. For another, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* is a big budget movie with 1,300 special effects that have taken a year of post-production—most movies are completed just a few months after filming. Until opening day, the filmmakers are keeping their heads down and their noses to the grindstone. If audiences show up in theaters to see the first Narnia movie, there could be more in the works.

"As big as this movie is, and all the wonderment of Narnia and all these creatures, we make sure the small stuff—the intimate stuff, the stuff that really touches you and gets to your heart—is in there and doesn't somehow get dwarfed by everything else," Johnson says. "So often I'll see movies that'll look fantastic with effects you've never seen before, and Dolby sound that'll blast you out of your seat, and yet you feel empty at the end of it. The hardest part was to protect the heart of the movie. That no matter what was going on in the movie, the audience was always aware of their emotions."

Considering that *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* is slated to open just three weeks after the newest Harry Potter movie, there's one question that can't be ignored. Can Narnia compete with Hogwarts?

McFeeley says, "I think the Harry Potter fan would find a lot to enjoy in this movie."

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By Gahan Wilson & Paul Witcover

For Harry Potter fans, the wait for book six is officially over.

Well it seems we have all survived long enough to read book six of the Harry Potter series and I'm sure all of us have found many interesting alterations have taken place in the course of our parallel real life adventures

I noticed, for instance, a very attractive young women (I have learned that it seems you never do get past noticing attractive young women) sitting in the bus seat before me as we both commuted to the city and saw that she was deep into reading a formidably large book. I was curious to see why she was in the company of such a weighty tome and so I took the liberty of peering over her shoulder and a warm glow ran through me when I saw it was the subject of this article, ***Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*** (Scholastic Inc hardcover $29.99) which had just come out with great fanfare only days ago

The saga of Harry Potter continues in book six: Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

Now I may have been guilty of a little fantasizing, but it struck me that though it was altogether possible the woman came across the first Potter book only a month or so ago and, enchanted, has been gobbling them all up in the intervening weeks And though it is a long shot, it's even possible that she may have been scrupulously working her way through its pages because some other magazine has assigned her the job of reviewing book six. But it was my dreamily romantic guess that she'd read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* a little over six years ago when she was say, ten, going on eleven or perhaps eleven going on twelve, and, if that is the case, I am sure she was being amused, and possibly reassured by the great number of similarities between the alterations going on in Harry's fictional life, psyche, and body and her own real life changements

It would be interesting to see how she will feel about it all when some breezy, gray Autumn day fifty or so years hence, she takes it into her head to putter about in the attic of her house and comes across the box she packed and taped up many years ago just before her wedding and the box suddenly opens (almost magically) and out pops those old Potter books including *The Half Blood Prince*—and she finds herself lazily browsing through them all again, perhaps for the very last time perhaps not

I wonder how very much differently this particular book in the series will strike her, because this is the one in which poor old Harry not only confronts more directly than ever before the attacks and machinations of the dark powers that have menaced him throughout the series, but now he finds himself forced to confront the far more profound mysteries of sex and other forms of maturation which now, in the twilight of his sixteenth year, have drifted into view.

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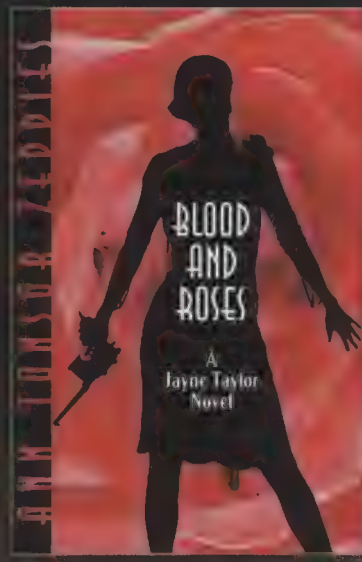

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Now Harry must somehow deal with these brand new arrivals and attempt to grasp their enormous implications not as a babe, nor even as a child, but as a burgeoning grown-up. Our boy sorcerer is now confronted with astounding new levels of the complex mortal puzzles of loss and gain and happiness and grief which, of course, he will never come even close to solving, much less resolving.

And it's not only Harry who finds himself in deeper waters: it begins to dawn on the nasty and once totally smug Draco Malfoy that being a minion of ominous evil powers bears with it a vast, frightening multitude of drawbacks and dangers—we learn that the great Lord Voldemort's high and mighty haughtiness has its roots in attempting to compensate for humble, if not to say repellent, beginnings and that his grand magical scheme to achieve immortality is not only villainously vile, but tacky and rather forlorn.

Worst of all, we discover that even dear old Dumbledore, the wisest and most powerful of the world's wizards, our best and greatest defense against the forces of darkness, is not a wall of iron but only flesh and blood like all the rest of us.

A very positive aspect of all of this is that the quaint and rather old-timey teachings that the Potter books unashamedly advocate, such as Dumbledore's dictum that love is the most powerful force of all, not only do not wither in the blast but convincingly grow stronger, and I must say that is a most reassuring thing to see in a series which has been resoundingly successful with the young. It is a hopeful sign that a saga of adventure which preaches that interior weakness is the sure sign of a tyrant has gone over very well indeed with a new generation. May it help them run this world somewhat more sensibly and much more compassionately than the lot which is presently in charge.

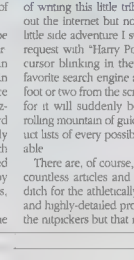
Another aspect of the Potter books which stoutly stands up to the new, far darker tone they have taken is is the totally ridiculous, over-the-top humor, from yucky descriptions of potion brewing to the very animate furnishings of Hogwarts, which has all along been one of my very favorite aspects of the Potter saga.

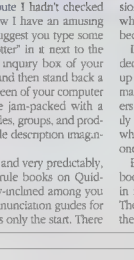
An outstandingly good source of it to be found in *The Half Blood Prince* is the merchandise offered by the Weasley twins in their highly successful store located in Diagon Alley, the shopping center of choice for both new and highly-experienced wizards, which is called Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, and specializes in outstandingly tasteless practical jokes, my favorite of which is a trick magic wand which, if ineptly waved by a would-be magician, turns into a floppy rubber chicken or a pair of underpants, depending on its whim.

A side effect of these books has been the creation of a number of sub-industries working the Potter mother lode. I long ago noticed the burgeoning of numerous printed guides and atlases and dictionaries and other whatnots starting to pop up barely after book one emerged to such great success. Now they are way too numerous to count, with many of them in their umpteenth revised edition.

Up until becoming involved in the process of writing this little tribute I hadn't checked out the internet but now I have an amusing little side adventure I suggest you type some request with "Harry Potter" in it next to the cursor blinking in the inquiry box of your favorite search engine and then stand back a foot or two from the screen of your computer for it will suddenly be jam-packed with a rolling mountain of guides, groups, and product lists of every possible description imaginable.

There are, of course, and very predictably, countless articles and rule books on Quidditch for the athletically-inclined among you and highly-detailed pronunciation guides for the nitpickers but that is only the start. There are amateur games past counting, and professionally manufactured games and aids for those games and long lists of cheats for them all, there are loads of Harry Potter tours which include Stonehenge and location sites for the movies (Oxford was used as a stand-in for Hogwarts, but I'd guessed that, and likely you did, too) and there are long, long lists of wise and silly quotes from all the characters in all the books and there are catalogues of spells and potions for good and evil purposes (I strongly suggest you leave them all alone) and many, many teachers' guides to each and every book.





So have fun with it.

Harry has received mixed reviews but my stance is, and has been from the start, that we lighten up and enjoy the books—I defy you not to be amused by them—because, bless them, they have succeeded magnificently in shutting up the talking heads who were going on and on about how "kids these days" never opened up a book, much less read a word, and that this awful state of affairs would worsen steadily from here on into the future and beyond—Harry has proven them dead wrong.

So bless his heart, say I, and may he thrive, and may that girl I saw on the bus find herself smiling quietly fifty years later as she settles on a comfortable, if slightly dusty, chair in that attic and finds herself quietly smiling as she sinks deeper and deeper into the slightly yellowed pages of *Harry and the Half-Blood Prince*.

Looking for Jake, Stories by China Mieville, Del Rey Books, NYC, Trade Paperback, 336 pages, $14.95.

I suspect China Mieville may very well be the absolutely best writer of dystopic science fiction who ever happened. I don't know of anyone who's got a clearer vision of the grim future which may very well come as a result of our sloppy and contemptuous handling of our present.

But he is also one of the most hopeful of the doomish seers because, unlike too many of them (who have given up in disgust on all of us entirely) Mieville continues to be a tender and compassionate man for all of his dark viewings of what may very likely happen. Or maybe because of them.

In real life he is very active politically, a decided scrapper who has by no means given up the battle against the dreadful times that may be to come which our movers and shakers are moving and shaking us into as speedily as they can. If worse does come to worse, which it very well may, I can't imagine anyone I'd rather have handy than China Mieville.

Be not afraid, however, that reading this book will be a doleful experience; the stories in it are highly entertaining and absorbing. They are all rattling good yarns, every one of them, and they are excellent mind stretchers

Someone is murdering young, beautiful women in mid-sixteenth century Venice. Even the most formidable walls of the grandest villas can't keep him out, for he steals into his victims' dreams. Hunting his chosen

THE DREAM THIEF

HELEN A. ROSBURG

ISBN#1-932815-20-1 $6.99 Fiction December 2005

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which will likely make you think on things you never thought on before

Some of the concepts are total and complete fantasy, such the delightful "Reports of Certain Events in London" wherein the narrator comes across the activities of a determined secret group which is bravely attempting to probe, and hopefully modify, the highly dangerous battles which are more and more taking place between traveling streets and byways. "The Bali Room" just tells you a good scary story about creepy diabolical doings in the childrens' area of a shopping mall and a little gem called "Details" concerns the hidden dangers of really noticing the fine points about what's going on around you

Most of the others are dead serious teaching tales starting with the title story "Looking for Jake" which concerns that funny feeling you may have had lately about how all the things around you seem to be falling apart, "An End to Hunger", a marvelous little warning against looking a too deeply into curious things you may stumble across during wanderings in the Internet lest they look back at you and "The Tain" which is a kind of extended adventure poem about ourselves and our images of ourselves which is uncomfortably haunting but will be good for you

It's a very good book and I truly believe you'll find it personally helpful I know I did

The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, 18th Annual Collection edited by Ellen Datlow, Kelly Link, and Gavin J. Grant: St. Martin's Press, NYC, hardcover/paperback: 480 pp , $35.00/$19.95.

Once again we can ourselves fortunate, for once again we've got one of the best annual anthologies out, plus for sure the best general survey of the whole fantasy field during the

last year, all tucked into one enormous book

I think Neil Gaiman's blurb "Year in, year out, it's always essential reading" says it best but, just in case you're somehow not familiar with this astounding publication, there is not only a huge summation for fantasy fiction in 2004 by Kelly Link and Gavin J. Grant and another for horror fiction by the truly amazing Ellen Datlow, there is also an extended essay on "Fantasy and Horror in the Media" by Edward Bryant; "Comics and Graphic Novels" by Charles Vess; "Anima and Manga" by Joan D. Vinge, "Fantasy and Horror in Music" by Charles de Lint; and "Obituaries" by James Frenkel

Every year when I get this book sent to me and I take my first look through it the thought of all the work that went into it, the research, the keeping track, affects me so severely that I have to take a little nap (each year the nap seems to get a little longer) before I can carry on to the first early stages of the actual reading of the thing. I always end up being glad I took that nap because by the time I reawaken to this mundane world I usually discover I've been totally immersed in the remarkable volume for hours and hours without having noticed one of the minutes contained therein passing by

If you have not gotten into the habit of reading this book every year I strongly suggest you develop the addiction

Gahan Wilson

Od Magic, Patricia A. McKillip, Ace Books New York, hardcover, 320 pp. $22.95, ISBN 0-441-01248-5

Patricia McKillip is back at the top of her form in this deceptively playful fantasy about a gardener employed at a school of magic

For centuries, the school of the powerful and mysterious wizard called Od has been situated in the city of Kelior, capital of the kingdom of Numis. In that time, the kings of Numis have exercised increasing control over the school and its wizards, until the teaching and practice of magic has become codified by law, the smallest deviation from which is severely punished. The kings rely upon the wizards to protect the realm from its enemies,

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but they do not trust magic or those who wield it, thus the wizards are like prisoners who lead lives of pampered privilege … as long as they do not attempt to break their chains The only wizard exempt from royal control is Od herself, who no sooner founded her school than abandoned it to go wandering through the world, returning for visits as brief as they are rare

In her travels, Od comes across Brenden Vetch, a solitary young man with a knack for growing things. Brenden's gift is magical, though he doesn't realize this for some time to him, it's simply part of his nature to listen to the plants and herbs of Skrygard Mountain and learn from them their secrets But Od sees the magic in him, both its promise and the painful price it has already exacted, cutting Brenden off from human intimacy. Telling him that her school is in need of a gardener, she recruits him for the job and dispatches him to Kelnor

Brenden's presence in the school has a profoundly unsettling effect King Galin's counselor, the grim wizard Valoren Greye, sees a potential threat in the new arrival's untamed magical abilities. The wizard Yar, a teacher at the school, is reminded of his own youthful promise and his failure to live up to it Meanwhile, the king's daughter, Princess Sulys, is secretly practicing magic on her own, in violation of the law. A talented but troublesome new student, Elver, is plaguing Yar with dangerous questions, and in the Twilight Quarter where all magic is forbidden, a showman named Tyramin and his daughter Mistral are delighting and confounding audiences with illusions that may be all too real

Not for McKillip the grand sweep of Tolkien; her mature books are built with the

clockwork precision of fairy tales, those self-contained universes that yet transcend their boundaries like dreams. That can be good or bad: Her previous novel, *Alphabet of Thorn*, was a beautifully constructed artifact that left her characters little room to breathe or grow; they could not escape the chilly confines of its intricate perfection But *Od Magic* is a garden of rich and unexpected delights The characters in these fertile pages are forever changing, escaping, surprising themselves … and the reader

Dragonmaster, Book One of the Storm of Wings Trilogy, Chris Bunch. Roc, New York, trade paperback, 416 pp., $15.00, ISBN 0-451-46030-8

Chris Bunch may not be the most elegant of writers, but he knows how to tell a story, and once he sinks his hooks into you, he doesn't let go. *Dragonmaster* is a gripping military fantasy about a young man, Hal Kalias, who dreams of flying with dragons and sees his dreams come true, in nightmarish fashion, after he is impressed into the Deramian army in the course of a long and bloody war—a war in which, for the first time, human ridden dragons are employed as weapons. The enemy is the Roche, a militaristic kingdom whose name and politics suggest the Boche, as the allies disparagingly referred to the Germans in World War I The Roche and their dark queen are actually more reminiscent of the Nazis in terms of military and political tactics, but the level of technology, magical and otherwise, of the belligerent nations makes WWI the proper analogy here, with the use of magic corresponding to chemical warfare, and dragons standing in for Sopwith Camels Just as, in WWI, believers in air power had to struggle against the limitations of their own technology, as well as the limitations of generals unable to raise their imaginations above the ground, so do Hal and other believers in "dragon power" find only grudging acceptance by the Deramian military establishment, and that only because of the skill with which the Roche have employed dragons as spotters and fighters

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Tina Morgan, Fiction Factor

In many ways, despite its fantastic trappings, *Dragonmaster* is a standard military novel, following a soldier's progress from raw recruit to grizzled veteran. What elevates the novel above the ordinary is Bunch's sure grasp of the endless ironies of military existence, his inspired use of the WWI template (including battles based on Gallipoli and the Somme), and his ability to bring his characters especially Hal, vividly to life. Like renowned aces von Richtofen and Fonck, Hal begins his military career on the ground, and his gritty experiences there serve him well when he is fighting far above it. Bunch is never less than convincing in his mustering of details, whether in the thick of combat or in the tedium of daily army life, where petty personal ambitions and vendettas, combined with the perquisites of rank, result in an infinite array of stupidities and humiliations. Yet this claustrophobic cru cible also forges camaraderie and, since men and women serve together in the Deraunian army, sometimes more, as Hal discovers when he meets Saslic Dunapur, a dashing young female flyer with whom he falls head over heels in love. Although he begins as a commoner, Hal's bravery and innovative thinking about the combat potential of dragons soon earns him promotion … as well as the envy and enmity of certain Delraunian nobles.

Hal's real nemesis is Yasin, a Roche nobleman who is at least his equal in putting dragons to new and unexpectedly deadly uses. The aerial combats of these adversaries, who respect and hate each other, are highlights of the novel.

Bunch's dragons, even though they do not breathe fire, would likely eat their Pernese cousins for breakfast. They are fierce, unpredictable, almost as dangerous to their own riders as to the enemy. Yet they are noble beasts, brave and capable of surprising loyalty. Many mysteries surround the dragons, from their origins to their abilities, and Bunch seems to be setting the stage for future surprises here.

The Hidden Family, Book Two of The Merchant Princes, Charles Stross, Tor, New York, hardcover, 303 pp , $24.95, ISBN: 0-765-31347-2.

Roger Zelazny's Amber Chronicles, which began with a bang and ended with a whimper, continues to spawn imitators. Charles Stross, a writer of hard science fiction, jumped on the bandwagon last year with *The Family Trade*, a novel that ended so abruptly, and with so little resolved, I wondered if the publisher had simply cut a single book in two. Frustrated readers of *The Family Trade* will be glad to know that *The Hidden Family* concludes the story arc begun in the earlier volume and introduces new complications that set the stage for volumes to come.

Zelazny employed esoteric playing cards to translate his characters from our world to the fantasy realm of Amber, at whose heart lay the Pattern, a maze-like path that led to alternate branchings of reality. Stross takes the Pattern and places it in a locket, this locket comes to Miriam Beckstein, a thirty-something year old journalist recently fired from her job. Miriam is an adopted child; she knows nothing about her biological father, and her biological mother was murdered shortly after Miriam's birth. Early in *The Family Trade*, Miriam's adoptive mother, Iris, gives her a box containing her murdered mother's personal effects, among which is the aforesaid locket. Later, alone, Miriam studies the intricately braided pattern there, feels a strange sensation, and finds herself transported to the kingdom of Grunmarkt in an alternate America whose technology and culture is medieval save for certain 21st century weapons and other gadgetry imported from Miriam's Earth by the local ruling class, who possess the same "world-walking" ability as Miriam—who, it turns out, is actually a member of this aristocracy, Countess Helge Thorold Hjorth.

But the returning prodigal is not met with open arms. Miriam's appearance threatens to reignite a civil war among the world-walking families, and she finds herself stalked by the same assassins responsible for the murders of her parents. When she foils an attempt on her life, Miriam discovers a third Earth, accessible by a locket belonging to one of the assassins. The America of this world is technologically in the 19th century and remains a British colony. The world-walkers of this steam-punk Earth are a branch of the Earth 2 clan descended from a man who vanished years before while on a mission to the West Coast.

In *The Hidden Family*, Miriam decides to make a quick fortune by flooding Earth 3 with obsolete 20th century technology from Earth 1, thus demonstrating her worth to the families of Earth 2. But Miriam's enemies have not given up, including Matthias, head of family security, who is plotting to take power himself.

Stross lays everything out in a capable if perfunctory way: His characters are cut-outs, his plot a perpetual train-wreck unconstrained by plausibility, his heroine a self-centered superwoman whose preternatural competence falters only when it gets in the way of future plot points. It's a fast read, slick and cynical. Stross surpasses his model in one way, at least. The first Amber quintet is wonderfully inventive; it ranks among Zelazny's best fantasy work. But its commercial success outstripped his creative impulse, and he wrote the next five books on automatic pilot. Stross is on cruise control from the get go. ❧

Paul Whitcover

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By Ari Berk

Milk, honey, and bread in myth and legend.

Oh, my bride, from your lips flow nectar
Beneath your tongue, milk and honey are hidden
—from "The Song of Solomon"

Without bread, even a palace is sad, but with it, a pine tree is paradise
—a Slavic proverb

I am living in Devon, England, at the moment, in a medieval barn on the edge of the Dartmoor. In the small of hours of the night, in such a house, the mind rambles backward and forward in time, imagining the daily routines, the days and nights, the bread and butter, of the people that have lived here and used this place over the past 600 years. A barn is a building of necessary things, of basics, life's staples about which much custom, curiosity, and belief have formed; a place where a bowl of milk or a bit of bread is nightly left for the little gods who watch over the farm and its immediate vicinity, but not much farther than that. In the lore of offerings and sacrifice, the high rites of the gods and common custom of house fairies share a wide frontier. In studying such beliefs, we may discern that the humblest of offerings is indeed a sacred thing.

So here is the lore of The Basics, three foods that remain effective indicators of the land's condition. If these are unspoiled, and readily available, all with the land and the people living on it is well. Here are three foods ancient and primal: one given, one found, one formed. Milk, honey, and bread. *Bon appetit.*

Faeries indulge in offerings of milk, honey, and bread in this piece by Wendy Froud

Milk of Nourishment

Of all the many naturally produced substances on the earth, milk is the single one whose primary purpose is to nourish living creatures. Many societies still rely on milk and milk products as their main food. These include numerous tribes of Central Asia, the Sami (or Lapp) people, the Todas of India, and many African tribes. All cultures rely on the milk of the mother, or her surrogate, as food for infants (though this is often supplemented by the milk of other creatures). In Italy and in nearly all of early modern Europe, it is believed that a baby may take on characteristics of the milk provider. Because of this, it is thought that only a nurse of the best character should be hired. In Poland, if a child returns to the breast after being weaned, it will stammer when it begins to speak.

In the Bible, Israel is referred to as "the land of milk and honey." In Judaism, the physical Torah is likened to milk in rabbinic literature. For this reason, Jews eat milk products on Shavuot, the holiday commemorating and celebrating the giving of the Torah.

Milk is also revered as one of the special gifts of Allah. "You have in cattle a lesson: we give you to drink from that which is in their bellies betwixt chyme and blood—the pure milk—easy to swallow for those who drink." In the funeral rites of ancient Egypt, it was sung that milk should never be far from the mouths of the dead. In the Egyptian Pyramid texts, Ra is asked to bestow the milk of Isis upon the deceased, thereby making them surrogate children of the goddess. Utterance 406 requests abundance on behalf of the dead.

Greetings to thee RA in thy beauty, in thy beauties.
in thy places, in thy two-thirds gold
Mayest thou bring the milk of Isis to (name of the dead), and the flood of Nephthys,

FORGOTTEN REALMS

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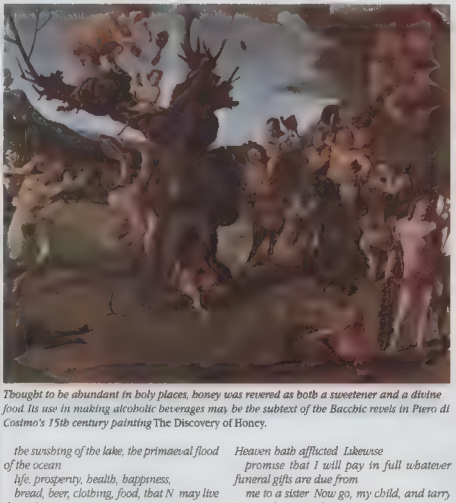

Thought to be abundant in holy places, honey was revered as both a sweetener and a divine food. Its use in making alcoholic beverages may be the subtext of the Bacchic revels in Piero di Cosimo's 15th century painting The Discovery of Honey.

the sunshing of the lake, the primaeval flood of the ocean
life, prosperity, health, happiness,
bread, beer, clothing, food, that N may live thereof

Both nourishment and sweetness are asked for to strengthen the act of remembrance and after-life body of the deceased in the other-world. Also, the active part of the living in the care of the dead form rites of catharsis by which the pain of loss of eased.

In the Greek play *Orestes* by Euripides, Helen must make offerings at the tomb of her sister but cannot make the visit herself. She sends her daughter Hermione to make the offering in her place, a gift of hair and a libation for the dead Clytemnestra.

HELEN
True, thou hast convinced me, maiden. Yes. I will send my daughter
for thou art right. (Calling) Hermione, my child, come forth before
the palace. (HERMIONE and attendants come out of the palace.) take
these libations and these tresses of mine in thy hands, and go pour
round Clytemnestra's tomb a mingled cup of honey, milk, and frothing
wine; then stand upon the heaped-up grave and proclaim therefrom,
"Helen, thy sister, sends thee these libations as her gift fearing
herself to approach thy tomb from terror of the Argive mob", and bid
her harbour kindly thoughts towards me and thee and my husband, towards
these two wretched sufferers, too, whom Heaven hath afflicted. Likewise
promise that I will pay in full whatever funeral gifts are due from
me to a sister. Now go, my child, and tarry not; and soon as thou
hast made the offering at the tomb, bethink thee of thy return. (HELEN
goes into the palace as HERMIONE and her attendants depart with the
offerings.)

Likewise, in Book X of the *Odyssey*, offerings including milk are made to Teiresias. Such offerings do not here form the rites of family, but are a magical invocation of the dead enacted so that the dead might be questioned upon an important matter.

When you have reached this spot, as I now tell you, dig a trench a cubit or so in length, breadth, and depth, and pour into it as a drink-offering to all the dead, first, honey mixed with milk, then wine, and in the third place water-sprinkling white barley meal over the whole. Moreover you must offer many prayers to the poor feeble ghosts, and promise them that when you get back to Ithaca you will sacrifice a barren heifer to them, the best you have, and will load the pyre with good things. More particularly you must promise that Teiresias shall have a black sheep all to himself, the finest in all your flocks.
When you shall have thus besought the ghosts with your prayers, offer them a ram and a black ewe, bending their heads towards Erebus, but yourself turn away from them as though you would make towards the river. On this, many dead men's ghosts will come to you, and you must tell your men to skin the two sheep that you have just killed, and offer them as a burnt sacrifice with prayers to Hades and to Proserpine. Then draw your sword and sit there, so as to prevent any other poor ghost from coming near the split blood before Teiresias shall have answered your questions. The seer will presently come to you, and will tell you about your voyage—what stages you are to make, and how you are to sail the sea so as to reach your home.

The Roman festival of Pales (an ancient Italian shepherd divinity of uncertain sex, to whom the day was sacred) took place on April 21, in both country and city.

Baskets of millet, millet cakes, and milk were offered to Pales, whose wooden statue, standing near the farmhouse, seems to have been splashed with milk. A feast followed in which shepherds and god took part. The shepherds then prayed to Pales to keep away evil influences—wolves, disease, hunger—and to bring good influences to bear—water, food, health to man and to flocks, they repeated the prayer four times, facing the East, while they cleansed their hands in fresh dew. The people drank wine boiled down until it was thick and then mixed with milk. After this, the farmer, his family, and his flocks leaped through bonfires made of straw, a rite which as they believed, would make women prolific. The worshipers, eating and drinking, lay about on the grass.

In a custom widespread over much of western and northern Europe, milk is left out at night by the hearth, or the front door, or in the barn for house spirits such as hobs, pixies, and tomten. It is further believed in some places (such as here in Devon and the neighboring county of Somerset) that if the faeries are not propitiated in this way, they will take what is theirs and punish the greedy by blighting cattle and causing their milk to dry up, spoiling cream, cursing the butter churn, or by coming in the night and drinking cattle and other milk-bearing animals dry. As a defense for such otherworldly attacks, Irish housewives would celebrate the eve of May by cutting and peeling boughs from the rowan (or mountain ash) tree and twisting them around their butter churns and milk pails to prevent their contents from being stolen by the faeries.

Such beliefs are remnants of very ancient practices, known in Greece and Rome (certainly practiced in Roman Britain), whereby the house god, the Lar (whose statue was kept in a special shrine, a larium, in the center of the house), required frequent sacrifice. If ignored, the Lares left the houses, becoming instead one of the Larvae, the demonic spirits who preyed on travelers. In beliefs such as these, dangerous powers are made safe and domestic through the related rites of honoring and sacrifice. As the symbolic and literal embodiment of nourishment, milk was the frequent offering to such forces, rendering them not merely familiar, but also family.

Although May Day was the day of greatest

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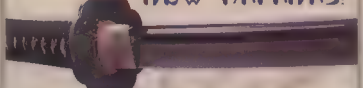

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rejoicing in Ireland, it was not without its dangers. The powers of faeries waxed at that time, and witches (who are often closely linked to fairies in folklore) were particularly known to meddle with milk, butter, children, and cattle. Because of this, many precautions were taken. A cold coal was placed under both cradle and churn. Primrose petals were strewn over the thresholds, for a fairy will not gladly pass that flower.

On the morning of the May, witches would go to great lengths to steal all the milk they could, although what they did with it all is not always clear in the tales. Some sources seem to indicate that if a witch got the milk of a particular household, all their good fortune was gone and any milk and butter they made during the ensuing year belonged absolutely to the faeries. Again, primroses play a part in protecting the interests of the farm; old women tied them to the tails of the cattle. Iron heated on the hearth was also thought to be efficacious, but whatever the precautions it had to be done before sunrise.

In the history of witchcraft, the mother-child relationship is mocked and/or subverted in the witch's practice of suckling their familiars or feeding them milk from a vessel. Some very specific early modern references exist, including the 1582 trial documents of Margery Sammon, who stated that she was given animal familiars in a wicker basket (in the form of toads called "Tom" and "Robin") by her mother, who taught her how to use them. The trial papers state that her mother "bade her keep them and feed them. Thus examinate [Margery] asking 'wherewithal?' her mother answered, 'If thou dost not give them milk, they will suck of thy blood.'"

A witch named Elizabeth Francis from Essex stated in 1566 that she had been given a familiar called Satan in the form of a white spotted cat, and that her grandmother taught her to "feed the said cat with bread and milk," and in 1582 a witch from the same county, Elizabeth Bennett, claimed to possess two spirits, one called "Suckin" who was black "like a dog," the other called "Lierd," who was "red like a lion." It was further said that "many times they drank of her milk bowl." In Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Queens* (1609), witches attempt to call up a familiar demon from the earth:

Deep, O deep, we lay thee to sleep,
We leave thee drink by, if thou chance to be dry.
Both milk and blood, the dew and the flood
We breathe in thy bed, at the foot and the head.
We cover thee warm, that thou take no harm.
And when thou dost wake,
Dame Earth shall quake.
And the houses shake,
And her belly shall ache.
As her back were brake
Such a birth to make
As is the blue drake

TOP: The Roman Lares may be the archetype of all manner of later household spirits. Often depicted as a pair of dancing youths, they required frequent sacrifice at an altar kept in the home, or sometimes at a crossroads. ABOVE: Another form of bread. In this detail from Roberti's The Israelites Gathering Manna, *God supplies nourishment to the Jews wandering the desert wastes after their flight from Egypt.*

Whose form thou shalt take

Closely paralleling that tradition, the fairy beliefs of Britain, Ireland, and Northern Europe also use milk as the favored offering, given in specific and implicit bargains with faeries while emphasizing and mimicking the familial bond between adult and child. The *Bean Nighe* of Scotland, one of the fairy washer-women who haunt the river fords (and often were a omen of impending death for whoever saw them), could be approached, and if the brave person "grabbed her breast and suckled it" they could then claim the fairy as their foster mother.

As with the familiars of the witches, good relations with the faeries required sacrifice. Usually basic foods were enough to ensure their favors and services. As we've seen, milk (often with bread mixed in, a common food for children) was left for them on the hearth or other thresholds and could also be poured on rocks, trees, or by springs. Early modern chroniclers and antiquarians noted that they needed "a pail of clean water, good victuals, and the like . . . and would . . . grind corn for a mess of milk" (Robert Burton), enjoyed a "messe of milke sopt with white bread" (Aubrey); and that the famous hobgoblin, Robin Goodfellow also required a "messe of white bread and milke" (Reginald Scott). Harsenet speaks of them in his Declaration:

"And if that the bowl of curds and cream were not duly set out for Robin Goodfellow, the friar, and Sisse the dairy-maid, why then, either the pottage was burned the next day in the pot, or the cheeses would not curdle, or the butter would not come, or the ale in the fat never would have good head.

I suspect that milk was the favored offering of both faeries and the dead because it emphasized intimacy and needed to be gotten fresh, thus being a gift that necessitated immediate and frequent offerings. Such offerings kept our "Good Neighbors" not only placated, but close to both heart and hearth. Curds and cream are also the best, highest fat, most nutritious part of the milk – to offer them means you're leaving yourself only the watery skimmed milk—in *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita is called "the queen of curds and cream, alluding to her richness and desirability—the part you skim off the top and keep. This again mimics the way children are fed the best most nutritious part.

There were rules about the use of milk in special situations as well as fear of its corruption. In 17th-century Scotland, any milk found in the house at the time of death was disposed of because of the prevalent belief that milk was highly susceptible to corruption and may be affected by spirits of the dead. While Breton belief allows milk to remain in the room with the corpse, any vessel of standing water must be poured out for fear that the departing spirit of the deceased might drown within it. In Ireland when a cow is milked, its owner will put her finger into the milk and then quickly crosses the cow with it while softly saying, "Mary and our Lord preserve thee, until I come to thee again."

So central to rural custom were such beliefs that the church in its early history and even the Protestant church issued edict after edict from its numerous councils, seeking to suppress such practices. The frequency with which it tried to put down these beliefs is a good indicator of their prevalence. The Council of Rouen, held in the 7th century, related the use of branches, rags, and flowers to worship at wells, but later councils recanted and condemned "worse practices" such as "the adoration of stones, the pouring of milk on hills, and the sacrifice of bulls."

Honey of Prosperity

And he put forth the end of the rod, and dipped it in the honeycomb. And he carried his hand to his mouth and his eyes were enlightened (1 Sam 14: 27)

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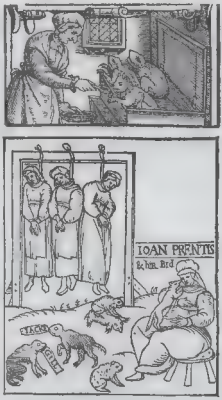
ingredient in the earliest intoxicating beverages. Looking at the world around us, we may judge the relative health of an ecosystem by its bees, by whether or not the land is "flowing with honey." The abundance of wild bees and the honey they make is evidence of good soil and water and so is an indicator (and hence a symbol of) a prospering environment. The common bee understands the secret of the great alchemical metaphor misunderstood by the alchemists of a hundred ages. The bee collects the nectar of the land into itself and then produces gold to feed the world.

Honey figures prominently in numerous ancient texts. The Old Testament uses it to describe the land promised to Abraham and his people. Biblical references to honey (Chronicles, Genesis, Song of Solomon, and Proverbs, respectively) mention it as a "first fruit" to be offered to God, that it is often sent as a present, symbolic of both "holy speech" and pleasant words, as well as with the acquiring of wisdom. In Judaic tradition, the beginning of a children's education was a marked by dripping honey the first page of their book so that the act of learning should always be sweet to them. Also, the Jewish New Year celebrations for Rosh Hashana include the eating of apples dipped in honey to help ensure a sweet year in which gladness and peace would reign. In medieval mystical prayers, Christ is referred to as "the honeycomb." Islamic belief holds that honey is



TOP Hidden in a chest, a witch draws out her familiars, like children, by feeding them from a bowl. ABOVE Women hanged as witches at Chelmsford in 1589. In the foreground, a familiar spirit prepares to suckle while the witch cups her breast.

the gift of Allah, who said that the bees should, "Take to houses in the mountains, and in the trees, and in the hives they build. Then eat from every fruit and walk in the beaten path of the Lord," and that "There issues from their body a draught varying in hue, in which is a cure for man."

Honey was called the "nectar of the gods" and as a sacred food was used in offerings and libations. Its widespread use is mentioned in Babylonian texts where it is the preferred offering to the gods Ishtar and Marduk for their help in dispelling witchcraft. The prevalence of such customs is evidenced by numerous later texts abolishing its use. In Leviticus, honey's use as a burnt offering is specifically condemned and in later periods, such as during the Synod of Auxerre (585 AD), consecrating wine that had been mixed with honey was likewise forbidden.

Ancient Vedic practices recommend feeding honey and butter to newborn boys. A similar reference is found when Isaiah consoles King Ahaz by speaking of a child to be born of a virgin who will eat butter and honey "that he may know to refuse evil and choose the good." The tears of the sun god, Ra, fell to the earth as bees. A bee was the avatar of the Hindu gods Vishnu, Indra, and Krishna, all of whom bore the title *Madhava*, "born-of-nectar." A bee was also the symbol of Peresephone, the Great Mother, and the Ephesian Artemis, and "Melissa" ("bee" from the Latin *mel*, sweet) was a title of Demeter's priest-

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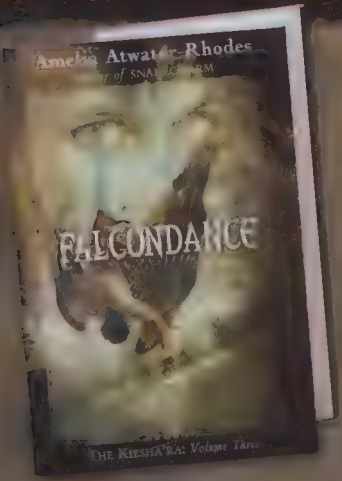

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In a rural house, offerings of milk would be left by the hearth for the faeries who would help with drudge work about the farm.

esses In the mysteries of Mithras, initiates who were spiritually reborn had honey poured on their hands and applied to their tongues, as it was customary to do with newborn children

In Greek myth, when Zeus was in his infancy, he was secreted away by Rhea, his mother, in a cavern that is home to hives of sacred bees There the godling was fed on goat's milk and honey Hippocrates, the father of Greek medicine, recommended honey, ass's flesh, and milk as an aphrodisiac, as well as honey for the curing of skin disorders Pliny the creator of the doctrine of signatures, suggested drinking a cup of honey and cider vinegar each day in order to cleanse the body of impurities and ensure excellent health Romans (as well as others up through World War II) used honey to clean wounds, making use of its tremendous antimicrobial benefits

As a general symbol of fruitfulness and fertility, honey is without peer. Croatians would pour honey on the threshold of a house in anticipation of the arrival of a bride and groom In the Balkans, the faces of the marriage couple were painted with honey prior to the wedding At weddings, Germans might display lovingly decorated beehives so that man and bee might share their festivities with one another Although not a widespread custom, some bridegrooms in India are given honey on their wedding day. This and other practices speak to me memory of earlier times when honey would have been part of the wedding sacrifice, given to propitiate the gods or other spirits who would then bless the rite, or leave it unharmed Other customs are well known, their language still used to describe parts of marriage ceremony, even when the actual use of honey has fallen away from fashion On the honeymoon, couples drink mead, or honey-wine, for fertility; to sweeten the marriage bed, a posset of honey, milk, and wine was given at the bedding of the bride

Ironically, honey is also associated with death A cup of honey used to be placed by the corpse at Russian funerals. Vedic funeral hymns instruct celebrants to give honey as an offering to Yama, the lord of the dead Other cultures used honey to clean corpses In Egypt and other lands, the bodies of the dead were preserved in honey and pots of honey were placed in tombs to ensure resurrection. The *Iliad* remembers the funeral of Patroclus at which urns filled with honey and oil were placed near his pyre, betokening the sweetness of life and the hope that such goodness would follow the dead into the afterlife The Greeks also believed that in addition to a coin (that must be given to the ferryman on the river Styx), the dead must also carry with them a cake of honey to give to Cerebus, the guard dog of the Underworld. It is further said that Alexander the Great was embalmed in wax and honey

The enduring power of honey within the folk imagination is so strong that it even invades the realm of the dream. To dream of honey may symbolize an unexpected triumph over adversity. A monarch who dreams of cracking open a honeycomb may plan on receiving riches and joy from his subjects But if a common person who dreams of getting the gift of honey when they had none before, it is an ill omen Wealth will soon be lost

More generally, the practice of "telling the bees" has been recorded across Europe and the rural United States. All important news from the community and the family must be told to the bees. The understanding here is that the bees are themselves are a valuable and much loved part of the local community, perhaps by virtue of their industriousness and strong work ethic relating to pollination The bees themselves are tied to a "village," the hive, and don't willingly move away from it No new project would begin without telling the bees Likewise, all deaths and births in the family were duly reported to them It is likely that such continuing beliefs are echoes of older practices and periods when bees were, as we've seen, considered messengers of the gods, or avatars of the gods themselves Simply, telling the bees establishes strong connections to place, which, if broken, diminish the land's ability to produce for human communities When bees are left to thrive, so do certain plants, which in turn are used by people along with the honey the bees produce When treated like kin, things in the natural world become family both literally and symbolically. More importantly, such creatures are then afforded status in human communities, ensuring their survival in a world where, even in early times, the advance of civilization often progressed to the detriment of the natural world

Recommended Reading

Christina Hole, *English Folklore*

Shepard and Norton, *The Story of Bread*

Briggs, Katherine, *Encyclopedia of Faeries*

F. Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithras*

W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*

Funk and Wagnall's *Standard Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend*

Eunpides , *Orestes* (trans Colendge)

Ruth Benedict, *Tales of the Cochiti Indians*

Bread of the Body

In more than Christian ritual, bread has long stood for the body. It is a composite food, simply assembled, and the food most often offered as sacrifice in religious rituals over the centuries While we can focus on bread itself it is impossible to completely isolate bread lore from grain lore Gods of vegetations, wheat, barley, and corn are important parts of the history of bread's related symbolism and inform its significance as a ritual offering. In the rites of Adonis, the Syrian vegetation god, his bones were said to be ground on a mill then scattered to the winds In Egypt,

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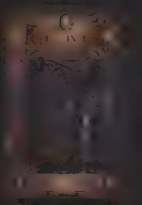

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Osiris's resurrection was prefigured and represented by sowing miniature sarcophagi with seeds that would sprout. In such lore, bread is a symbol of metamorphosis (seed to grain, grain made into bread), a product of cooperative effort (the farmer, the miller, the baker), and the only one of our three foods whose ingredient has a seasonal/cyclical existence.

Communion with the vegetation deities of pagan belief was taken in the form of many substances, but bread was paramount. In the Mysteries of Dionysos, the initiate partook of a cake or *makaria* (literally "a blessedness") This similarity of custom offended Tertullian who, discussing the communion and baptismal rites of the Mithraic mysteries, put down 'the oblation of bread' among initiates as the work of the devil 'who copies certain things of those that be divine,' claiming a singular privilege for Christians that had been a long since been commonplace for pagans.

The ritual use of bread often embodies an act of remembrance. In Jewish tradition, during Passover—also known as The Feast of Unleavened Bread—bread appears many times in the story and related custom of the holiday. Jews are forbidden from having anything leavened in their homes during the days of Passover in remembrance for those Jews, centuries ago, who fled from Egypt. Their flight from Egypt was so hasty they had no time to wait for their bread to rise, so the dough baked as it was. Flat bread, or matzah, is eaten as part of the Passover ritual.

The use of bread at Passover is carried over into the New Testament, and is used to establish new rituals that break with strictly Judaic custom and hearken back instead to pre-Christian practice wherein the body of the god is sacrificed and distributed among the celebrants.

On Thursday morning Jesus called to him the twelve disciples, and he said to them, This is God's remembrance day, and we will eat the paschal supper all alone. And then he said to Peter, James and John, Go now into Jerusalem and there prepare the pasch. And the disciples said, Where would you have us go to find the place where we may have the feast prepared? And Jesus said, Go by the fountain gate and you will see a man who has a pitcher in his hand. Speak unto him and say: This is the first day of unleavened bread, The Lord would have you set apart your banquet hall where he may eat his last passover with the twelve. Then Jesus sat with his disciples at the table of the feast and said, Behold the lesson of the hour: . Then Jesus took a loaf of bread that had been broken not and said, This loaf is symbol of my body, and the bread is symbol of the bread of life: And as I break this loaf, so shall my flesh be broken as a pattern for the sons of men; for men must freely give their bodies up in willing sacrifice for other men. And as you eat this bread, so shall you eat the bread of life, and never die. And then he gave to each a piece of bread to eat. From henceforth shall this bread be called

Remembrance bread

The liturgical use of bread comprises a large body of lore, but stretches back to an early church in which adherents themselves brought their own bread and wine to the altar. Increasing emphasis on and reverence for the eucharist led to use of specially prepared altar breads. These hosts become smaller and thinner in the church of the West. A bit of doctrinal history: The medieval church, responding to the growth of heresies instituted the requirement that the eucharist be performed with church-produced white wafers because in the 11th and 12th centuries, the church codified the doctrine of transubstantiation to insist that the bread was the body of Christ, not a symbol; a white wafer that dissolved on the tongue did away with troublesome questions about what it meant to 'chew' God up and swallow him. It also eliminated variations in the 'body' of Christ and symbolized that the eucharist was the presentation of the bloodless body—the blood was separate in the wine.

When the flock no longer brought their own bread to use as the host, they continued bringing their own bread to the church to be blessed. This blessed bread was called *panis benedictus*. It is not the same bread used in the mass, but special bread of blessing often given as a gift or used to consecrate a special event. Although not the host, the continuity of belief relating bread to the sacred body of the deity is still revered.

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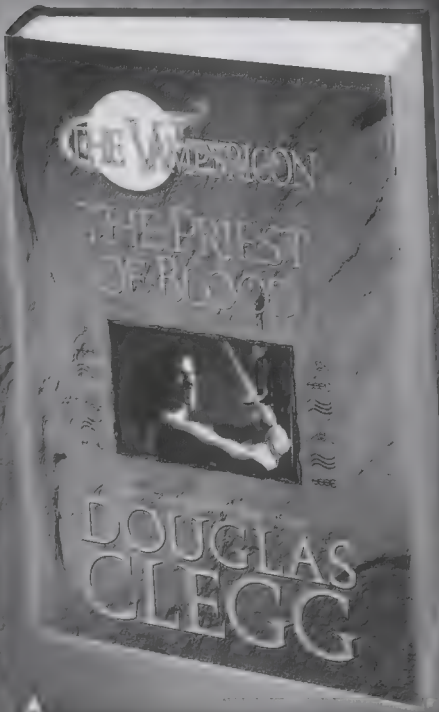

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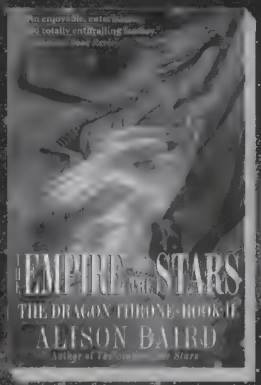

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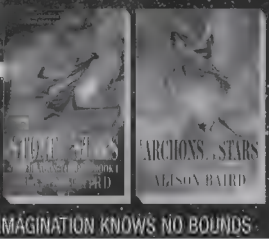

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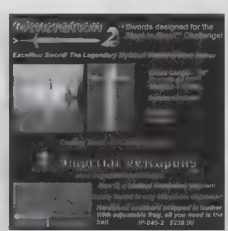


In Mexico, *Pan del Muerto*, Bread of the Dead, is made as an offering to the deceased during the *Día de los Muertos*. Most often, the bread is circular and decorated with a cross of bones covered with sugar. Although seemingly simple, the bread is a complex symbol linking the living with the deceased through the communal bond of shared sustenance and remembrance. Such relationships are mirrored in many stories where bread creates a bond between the living and dead, or between earthly and otherworldly people.

Two stories in particular emphasize the depiction of the offering of bread as prelude to a relationship with an otherworldly person. In "The Story of Long Snake" from the Xhosa of Africa, a girl gives bread to Long Snake on the advice of his mother. When the girl's younger sister refuses knowledge from her elder sister, the younger sister's actions set off a retributive cycle of events that sever an otherworldly relationship.

Once upon a time a certain girl left her father's place, and went to the village of Long Snake. Having arrived at the village of Long Snake she remained there, but the owner of the place was absent. The only person present was the mother of the owner of the place. Then in the evening the mother of Long Snake gave that girl some millet, and told her to grind it. After it was ground she made bread. When it was ready the mother of Long Snake said "Carry this bread into the house of Long Snake."

A short time after that girl went into the house, the owner of the place arrived. Then she gave him bread and fermented milk, and he ate. When they had finished the food they went to sleep. Then early in the morning Long Snake went away, because in the daytime he lived in the open country. The girl went to the house of the parents of Long Snake. The mother of Long Snake clothed her with a very beautiful robe. After she was dressed she called for an axe, and went to cut firewood. Having arrived in the open fields she did not cut the firewood, but she threw away the axe and ran to her father's place. When she arrived at her father's place, her sister asked for where she had got that beautiful robe. She told her, and her sister said, "I am going to that village too." The girl said: "Just listen, and I will tell you the custom of that village. But her sister said in reply: "I do not want you to tell me anything, because you yourself were not warned before you went." Then she set off at once, and went on till she arrived in the evening at the village of Long Snake. When she sat down the mother of Long Snake gave her millet, telling her to grind it and make bread. When it was ready she took it into the house of Long Snake. Then in the evening the owner of the place arrived, and the girl gave him bread and fermented milk. When they had finished eating they went to sleep, and early in the morning Long Snake went away.

Then the girl went to the house of Long

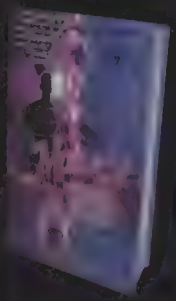
Moon's Web

C.T. Adams & Cathy Clamp

August 2005 from Tor

In the highly-anticipated sequel to the award winning *Hunter's Moon*, mafia assassin turned werewolf Tony Giodone and his new mate, Sue, are hiding in a community of Sazi shapeshifters in Chicago. But something is kidnapping and killing female Sazi...after it sucks out their powers. Its latest captive is Babs, the girlfriend of Tony's former mob boss. It's up to Tony and Sue to save her, and possibly all of humanity!

"The second Tony and Sue werewolf chronicle is a terrific tale that will have fans howling for more escapades from this couple and their pack."
–Midwest Book Review



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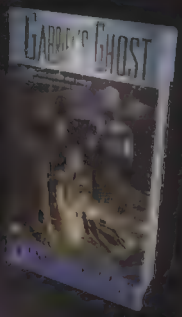

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Readers have come to expect the extraordinary from author Linnea Sinclair, but *Gabriel's Ghost* still exceeds all expectations! With the vision and texture of a poet, the heart of a warrior, and the skill of a master, Sinclair creates a world of psychic gifts and shape shifters, of dangers beyond imagination and love beyond question... This court-martialed captain and this 'ghost' create a tale so entrancing, so mesmerizing that readers will be absolutely blown away by their fabulous tale. *–Midwest Book Review*

Linnea Sinclair

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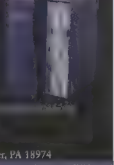

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Snake's parents. His mother clothed that girl also in the same manner as she had dressed the elder one. Then she borrowed an axe and went to cut fuel. In doing so she made an excuse to run away. On this day, however, the man went after his wives, and arrived at his father-in-law's place as the sun was setting. They went out of the house that the bridegroom might sleep in it. While he was eating, the people of the village piled up bundles of grass, and the bridegroom was burned in the house. In this manner he died.

In the story "Coyote Imitates Crow," from Cochiti Pueblo, Coyote's body becomes a versatile picnic basket of useful tidbits for the other animals. Here, Coyote desires bread and corn-milk, but instead, his greed transforms him into food for others. In this manner he shows his god-like qualities, not through cleverness (which he is little bestowed with), but by becoming the sacrifice by which others may thrive.

Once there was a high bank of paper bread of all colors. At the bottom it was blue, then white, red, gray, and white. On the top of this high bank there was a crow, and at the bottom there was a little pond of sweet-corn milk. The crow sang:

High bank of paper bread, high bank of paper bread,
Pond of sweet-corn milk, pond of sweet-corn milk

Every time, he bit a piece of paper bread off the bank he flew down to the sweet-corn pond to take a drink. Coyote came along and said, "How nicely you jump. Sing the song to me for I want to eat paper bread and drink the sweet-corn milk. I will do just as you do." "All right. He sang his song.

High bank of paper bread, high bank of paper bread,
Pond of sweet corn milk, pond of sweet-corn milk

Coyote listened and learned the song. He said, "All right, now I'll start." "All right, you sing first." Coyote stood on top of the high bank and sang and ate. He said, "Now I'll take a drink." He was singing and getting ready to jump at the end of his song. He jumped down and he fell straight into the pond and right there he died. Crow began to cau (for joy). She wanted his eyes. She took them out and shook them. They sounded like bells. She called, "Animals, whoever uses fur for nests, come and take it from Coyote who has done mischief." Wood rats and mice and chipmunks and squirrels came and took the fur from Coyote for nests. Crow said, "All the kinds of birds that eat meat, come and eat Coyote, for he has done mischief." The eagle and the vulture and the chicken hawk and hawk came, and they all ate him up. There was nothing left but his bones. Along came an old, old man with a carrying basket. He walked with a cane and he could hardly get along. He came to the place where Coyote's bones were and said, "These will make a nice soup for grandmother." He

Continued on page 116

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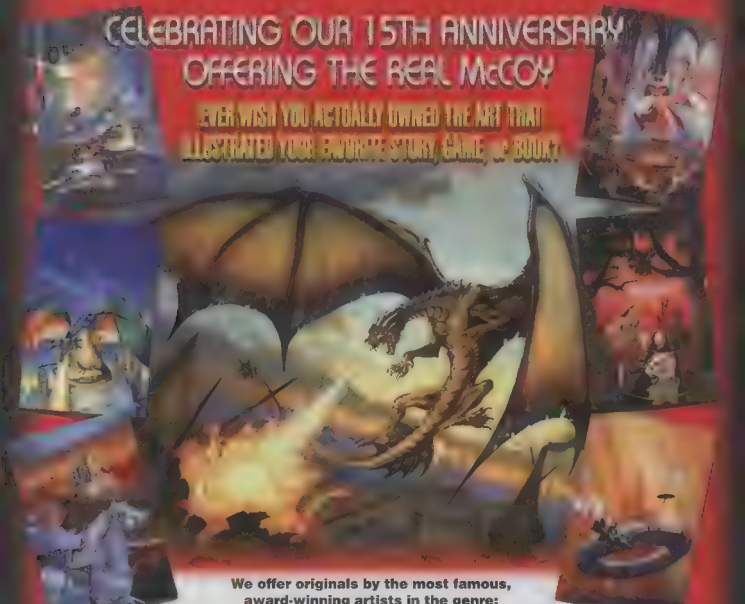

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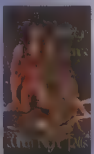

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En Forêt Noire

SOMETIMES, NO MATTER HOW HARD YOU TRY, YOU FIND YOURSELF DEEP IN THE DARK WOODS. SOME PEOPLE NEVER EMERGE FROM THEM, AND SOME DO THOUGH LIFE LOOKS VERY DIFFERENT ON THE OTHER SIDE.

WHILE THE CARRIAGE WAS TRUNDLING TOWARD THE SMALL CITY OF ARLIN, THROUGH THE DUSTY SUMMER FIELDS—THAT WAS WHEN LOUIS CORBIÈRE FIRST SAW IT.

THE FOREST.

"What's there?" It was not Louis, but the fat lawyer traveling with his thin wife, who inquired

Only one person, the wrinkled little clerk, knew

"The Forest of Arlinacque. An ancient wood, said to have existed since the era of Charlemagne."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the lawyer, who, despite his question, believed he knew everything.

And the clerk said no more

Later, at dinner in the inn on the Arlin Road, Louis mentioned the forest to the innkeeper

"*That* place. Oh, monsieur. It's too close for my comfort."

"Close? But it lies—what?—ten miles away from your inn here."

"Too close, I said."

"Why?"

"A bad spot, monsieur. Rotten. Dark in more than darkness."

Louis pondered as he ate the roasted meat and drank the wine. The Forest of Arlinacque had indeed looked very dark. Even in the blistering scorch of the late afternoon sun, it was entirely black in form: impenetrable. Huge pines, monumental yews, and other conifers tangled together, reaching high up into the thick, hot air. It had taken the coach, traveling quite fast, half an hour or more to pass the trees. But though Louis had striven to squint between them, he had seen very little. The aisles of the forest were like caves full of shadows. Beyond, the fields resumed, and beyond them, the hills, and finally the shape of the mountains was scratched out thinly on the sky.

Reverie ceased. The inn was generally rather noisy, seeming packed with soldiers and shouting drinkers.

As Louis was retiring for the night, a stooped and very elderly and eccentrically old-fashioned man approached him on the inn stair.

"I heard you ask about the forest, monsieur. Perhaps you would care to glance in this book, which carries the legends of many areas, including that of Arlinacque."

"You're too kind."

The old man smiled and said, "I'm merely old, monsieur, and have been so for a long time. The only real pleasures left to me are to be either very kind or very cruel."

Louis was young, not yet twenty-two, and old age was like another country to him. He felt sorry for its inhabitants. After all, life was dangerous and uncertain; he might never have to enter the country of the old.

Upstairs, he lit extra candles and sat propped high in bed, reading the book the old man had given him.

It was, like the donor, an antique, published, it seemed, around the time of Louis XIII. As the Bourbon namesake turned the pages, ordinary Louis Corbière found fascinating anecdotes of ghosts, undines, dragons in hidden valleys, beautiful women imprisoned beneath ruined castles, and so on. Eventually he located a reference to Arlinacque. By then the candles were burning low, and he was tired. The ornamented print fluttered against his eyes, and before he had read more than five or six lines, he fell asleep.

Even so, the *idea* of the forest stayed with him, and followed him down into unconsciousness.

Louis dreamed he ran between dark trees, in darkness. Somewhere high above, a moon shone, flashing through pine needles and branches like a silver sword. Ahead lay no safety—and behind was *terror*. Race as he might, he could not outrun the awful unknown horror that pursued him. His only hope would be to find a way out of the forest. And he had no chance of that, he thought: none at all.

He woke near dawn, sweating; his feet and fists stinging because he had clenched them so hard.

Presently he laughed at himself. He was a grown man, on the way to visit his betrothed, for the first time in her family home. She was a pretty girl who liked him. How foolish to succumb to childish fears.

In the morning, he bore the book, the passage on the forest unread, down into the main room of the inn. The elderly guest who had loaned it was nowhere to be seen—apparently not yet risen from his bed. Louis therefore left the book in the guardianship of the innkeeper, whose puzzlement might be a cover for intended theft. But Louis could do nothing else. The coach was due to leave in ten more minutes.

Dinner the next night was a quite different affair. Celie's parents, the de Lejays, had welcomed Louis, just as they had in Paris, bemoaned as usual his lack of a servant to travel with and take care of him, and presented him, laughing, to their blushing daughter. The afternoon progressed happily enough, through a rose-hung garden, to a pleasant enough evening, during which endless visitors arrived to greet Louis, culminating in a lavish supper. The table was swagged in lace, jeweled by candles and the best china and crystal, elegant, if often chipped. Sixteen people sat down to dine. Unfortunately, one of them was Célie's brother, Marcellin.

Marcellin had never cared for Louis, or the betrothal, and made this plain in various "playful" ways—as if only joking with Louis, rather than trying to catch him out or demean him. Louis's father had formed his wealth in trade, and so ably that Louis himself had not been required to enter the business and instead had pretensions to study. The de Lejays, meanwhile, kept up minor aristocratic habits, but had fallen on hard—that was *moneyless*—times. Hence the match, with which everybody, saving Marcellin, seemed well-pleased.

"And how do you find the country, hereabouts?" asked Marcellin sneeringly of Louis, across the festive candles.

"Countrified," said Louis, smiling.

Célie's father laughed, and so did Célie, but Marcellin continued, "Come, come, Monsieur Louis. Surely you made out some difference between our region and the tame rambles around Paris? Or can you really not tell a hawk from a handsaw?"

Louis, "Even Hamlet could do that, apparently, when the wind replied was blowing the right way."

"Oh, bravo. I'd forgotten you were a scholar. You must be," Marcellin added, "to go bouncing about in a public carriage without your servant."

Madame de Lejay raised her hands in alarm. Louis said, mildly, "I prefer to travel that way. And on journeys, servants get underfoot, I find."

"Then you should train them otherwise, monsieur. My Jeannot is *never* under my feet. He knows too well what I'd do to him if he got in *my* way."

Louis mentally considered Marcellin's Jeannot a moment, a villainous, leering fellow with a scar across his forehead which, supposedly, Marcellin had given him years before.

Louis decided to change the subject. "I did see one thing that interested me greatly, as we drove here. A huge black forest of pine trees that someone told me is called Arlinacque."

Madame de Lejay gasped and crossed herself. A number of others at the table looked nervous.

"I beg your pardon," said Louis. "But—is it *truly* such a terrible place?"

"One never knows," said Monsieur de Lejay. He added somberly, "A great many people have vanished there."

"Oh, worse than that!" cried a blonde lady across the table, who was a cousin of Madame's.

"Men walk into that forest—and never come out of it. They are never seen again—nor any who go there to search for them."

"There is the story of a soldier," said Monsieur de Lejay, now even more heavily

"This happened only a few years back He was seeking employment, having been wounded in the Prussian War, and was on foot, having given his horse for his debts So he took an unfamiliar track to Arlin and happened across the edges of the forest An old woman was out on a field nearby, hurrying to get home in the dusk, but she ran over to him and clutched his arm. 'Don't go into the wood,' she said to the soldier 'Why's that, granny?' he asked her. She said that none who went in there ever came out again. Things were there, inside Dreadful things, that sucked away blood and bone, and left only ashes blowing on the ground."

Louis glanced about him What theater! No one seemed to breathe Even Marcellin looked uneasy, his eyes fixed on his father. Yet Louis himself, amused though he attempted to be, felt abruptly a sinking at his heart He told himself it was nothing, and that he was too sophisticated to be made afraid by this provincial telling of horror tales

Monsieur de Lejay, however, went inexorably on.

"The soldier told the old woman, as others reported later, that he would heed her warning, but obviously he did that only to restore her calm. He had no intention of tramping all the way round the forest to avoid going into it, looking for the Arlin Road. He was already footsore, and perhaps thought very likely he would meet gypsies in the wood, or charcoal-burners, who might keep him company and share some wine with him through the night

So, soon after, he set off into the trees "

Monsieur paused

"And then?" demanded one of the other relatives, a young lady with curls, who maybe had never heard this story before.

"And then—nothing, I fear He went into the wood and, like the rest, never emerged from it Although some persons from a nearby village, who were out on the pastures above, heard, during the night, hideous screams coming from among the pines. Such things had been heard before. They did not dare go to look. Then, in the days following, six of the soldier's companions from the war, discovering their comrade had vanished, went also to the Forest of Arlinacque—and one of these men *returned.*

Louis said, "But, monsieur, forgive me, but I thought you said no one ever did."

"Ah, my dear friend. This young soldier had not gone *into* the forest, only to the very edge of it, from where he watched his brothers walk away through the trees. It seems he, too, had a wound, a sword-cut to the leg, and had sat down to rest, meaning after a minute to catch up to them But instead, as he told it, a fearful coldness and lethargy swept over him, almost a stupor, so he thought he would faint And then it came to him how no sound was in the forest, not the rustle of an animal passing through, not the rattle of a bird's wings, nor any song or call A silence was there and a darkness was there—and his companions were in the midst of it—but in that very moment, as he forced himself to his feet to pursue them - he heard them *shrieking,* and so ghastly were the noises—thus, to a man who had recently served in battle—that he fell down in a swoon. Later he dragged himself to the nearest town. He spoke to the priest and the notary. His account is on record, and anyone may see it."

So absolute now was the silence in the dining room that when a wick popped suddenly in one of the candles, two or three of the ladies cried out

"But," Louis said, "what—*things* are they reckoned to be, in the forest?"

Madame de Lejay spoke leadenly, her eyes cast down as if afraid even to talk of it. "*Vampires.*"

"OH, LOUIS, WHERE DO THE SOULS GO, WHEN THEIR BODIES WERE THE victims of vampires?"

Louis frowned at Célie, in the moonlit garden of the de Lejay house. He could smell roses, vigne-de-miel ... and Célie's perfume. He wished they could discuss other matters.

Nor would he say what he had read, here and there, in his studies—that any victim of a vampire became himself a vampire, too. Why, anyway, must this be the case? Surely it must depend. Who could know?

"All good souls," he said sternly, "go to God, whatever the man

Louis frowned at Célie, in the moonlit garden of de Lejay house. He could smell roses, vigne-de-miel, and Célie's perfume.

ner of their death I believe that, Célie And so must you "

His sternness seemed to console her. She liked to be guided; he had observed that on the three previous occasions they had been together. But this was the first time they had been allowed to be alone He looked at her, her sweet face, and saw how her eyes admired him and thought that, as well as liking her, he might fall in love with her, too. How splendid that would be

"Célie, we must trust in God."

"And—in each other?"

To kiss her was a delight. He experienced vast joy, simply because things were turning out so beautiful.y.

But raising his head, the perfect moment was spoiled. For over there, against the vine-grown wall, Marcellin stood, smoking his pipe, unseen till then, but *seeing,* watching the lovers with the flat, gelid eyes of a snake

LOUIS STAYED IN THE DE LEJAY HOUSE FOUR DAYS AND SPENT A LOT OF that time with Célie

He began to desire her greatly and was also appreciative of her talents, especially when she played the family harpsichord. The parents were affable. Everyone appeared glad. Even Marcellin, Louis was thankful to find, seemed to have become grudgingly resigned to the marriage of his sister to a tradesman's son

On the fifth morning, the whole household was up early to bid Louis farewell. He was to catch the public coach to Paris, which left the market square at seven o'clock. To his surprise, after a tender parting from Céline, Marcellin fell into step with Louis. "I'll see you safe on the coach, my dear brother-to-be. And look, here's Jeannot to carry your bags."

Louis felt an immediate misgiving. Though the general good-will might have made his perceptions cloudy, he now suspected a plot. However, to resist might well give offense to the beaming parents of his betrothed. So he accepted Marcellin's offer urbanely.

In the square, a few persons waited for the coach, and soon it clattered into sight. The brown church was striking a quarter to seven from its clock, as Jeannot, his grinning face like that of an ill-treated, ill-natured dog, threw Louis's bags—rather carelessly—to their place.

Then Marcellin spoke. "Do you know, I think I'll travel a short way with you, Louis."

"That's not necessary, thank you."

"No, no. I can do with an excursion. As far as Guistanne, maybe. That's about an hour off, is it not? Then I'll hire a horse and jog back, Jeannot," he added, in a jolly tone that was patently false, "what do you say?"

Jeannot only grinned.

Louis said, "But there'll be no room on the coach."

"There, there. We can squeeze in. See how few other passengers there are. You get in, Louis, and Jeannot, you also. I'll just have a word with the driver. I never met one of his sort would pass up the chance of some francs for a drink."

Very reluctantly, and still punching his brains to find a way to deny these unwanted companions, Louis got into the coach. Jeannot hopped in at once behind him and thumped down on the seat at his side. Presently Marcellin joined them, all smiles and charm, flirting with the two wives in the coach, speaking very respectfully to the cleric in the corner. At Louis, he showed his long white teeth in disturbing satisfaction.

Louis could only smile too and put up with it all. At Guistanne they would get out, presumably. Yet he feared they would not. Oh then, let them go all the way to Paris, if they must. There, he could make firm excuses to slough them. Even if, as he sensed would be necessary, he would then have to "loan" Marcellin the money for lodging, both in Paris and on the way there, not to mention the fare for the coach back to Arlin.

They reached the inn at midday. Here everyone got off and dined, Marcellin too, for needless to say neither he nor Jeannot had removed themselves at Guistanne.

Over the meal, Marcellin's conversation was unctuous and gloating. Louis conceived a strong urge to somehow elude him, and his servant, while at the inn. Louis had a crazy notion of hiding somewhere until the coach had left with them.

But then, of course, he doubted they *would* leave without him. He told himself fiercely not to be a fool. He must put up with them. For what could these two wretches do to him, after all?

He had, in the haze of blooming love and general success, forgotten the Forest of Arbnacque.

It was about ten miles, the forest, from the inn, as Louis had previously pointed out to the innkeeper.

The coach bounded off from the inn yard at about two in the afternoon, but then, after some seven or eight miles, it mysteriously slowed, then stopped altogether.

Consternation had the passengers craning from the windows, Marcellin with them.

The driver got down and came round to the door. "All will be well, mesdames, messieurs. Just a tiny adjustment is needed. We'll be off again in twenty minutes."

"Twenty! Oh," said Marcellin to Louis, "Let's stretch our legs, shall we?"

The carriage was unbearably hot, parked where it had come to rest out on the road between the fields, under a brazen, pallid sky.

Nevertheless, Louis did not want to leave the carriage. He said he would remain. But, "What nonsense! Doesn't know what's good for him, my brother Louis—" and somehow, in a couple of swift maneuvers, Jeannot and Marcellin had ungently lifted Louis off his seat and out of the vehicle.

Once they were down on the road, Louis thrust them away. "What in God's name are you at?"

"Why, I'm concerned for you, my dear. What else?"

At that very second, the driver's mate went running round the carriage. He slammed the door shut and leapt up on the driver's box. The driver was, it appeared, already there. Next, the long lizard-tongue flick of a whip set the horses racing away down the road, the coach rumbling behind them, only a startled face or two peering back through the windows at the three men left on the road.

"My bags—" exclaimed Louis.

"Damn your *bags*. But that coachman's a good judge—he can tell who has the class and who has not. He did just as I told him. Meanwhile, you and I, we've other business."

Truly horrified now, Louis turned to see Marcellin had produced a small, silver-chased dueling pistol. He aimed it at Louis's head, while Jeannot stood gobbling and spitting like a rabid dog.

"What do you want, Marcellin? Are you planning to murder me?"

"Maybe not. But since you're to wed my sister, I'd like to find out if you're worth anything, you common little lout. Worth anything that is, apart from your dirty money. What do you say? Shall we take a walk?"

THEY WALKED, OF COURSE, ALONG THE ROAD FOR ABOUT two miles, by which time they had reached the outskirts of the forest.

It was black as pitch, exactly as Louis remembered it. Some crows that were flapping over a cornfield nearby seemed always, even in their widest circlings, to avoid the outposts of the trees.

Marcellin halted and so therefore did Louis, while Jeannot prowled up and down behind them.

Louis had considered trying to break away, but he had not convinced himself Marcellin, who now seemed both stupid and insane, might not take a shot at him if he did so. Such guns were notoriously unreliable—and, even not meaning to wound Louis fatally, Marcellin might still accidentally do so. Besides, there was nowhere here to escape to. The carriage, in the charge of the bribed driver, was far off. And though he had heard of villages and towns nearby, Louis did not know their location. As for the inn, it was some eight miles back along the road.

"Well, now," said Marcellin. "There it is, this vampire-haunted wood. What do you say, Louis? Shall we take a stroll in it?"

LOUIS, NATURALLY, HAD BEEN AWARE THIS WAS MARCELLIN'S PLAN—been aware of it, if in some vague unrecalled way, since luncheon.

He felt, Louis, a deep, ominous reluctance to enter the forest. But he knew that if he refused, this fiend, and the fiend's degenerate servant, would drag him in among the pines, or, perhaps more likely, the two of them would give Louis a violent beating and leave him lying on the track.

So Louis shrugged. "If we must."

"Oh, yes. We *must*. Not scared, are you, dear brother?"

Louis said nothing. And Jeannot laughed in his own unmusical neigh.

They walked on up the road.

After maybe five minutes, a path appeared through the fields that led toward the forest. It was an overgrown path, evidently infrequently used. They took it. All around, the dry, yellow stalks of ripened grain stood like watching sentinels at a death march. Then the shadow of the pines came spilling down, cool, *cold*, smelling of a strange hollowness, less verdant than *empty*.

The silence was all at once immediate and implacable. It was a silence like a loud noise.

Louis thought, in order to be heard above it, he must shout. But he said nothing, and when Marcellin spoke again, his voice sounded only dulled—yet it had taken on a very different tone.

"I remember old tales about this forest," said Marcellin. "Yes. A place of the Devil. Look, do you see between the trees? All the slight undergrowth there is stays entirely undisturbed. No one comes here. No one dares. They say no animal or bird will ever enter it. If ever one strays in here, it too vanishes and is never found."

He is trying to frighten me, Louis concluded. But when he glanced at Marcellin, his enemy's face was pale, and Marcellin's eyes darted uncertainly about the dim, barely-to-be-seen avenues between the pine trunks. They were on the very brink, staring in. Yet even now it seemed to be too late. They were already trapped in some web of sticky darkness and horror and could not move away, only forward.

Even Jeannot looked wary at last, though he said not one word.

"Perhaps," said Marcellin. He hesitated. Louis waited, hoping Marcellin would relent, and they might still get free of the trees. But no. Marcellin frowned suddenly and said in a harsh, low growl, "Come on then, brother Louis. Onward!" And he waved the pistol.

They stepped in among the trees, and Jeannot plodded after them.

Then all the shadows dropped together. It was like the curtain of night. Louis paused to allow his eyes to adjust. Marcellin and Jeannot did the same, the latter cursing. But the blackness was uncanny. Even the densest forest, in early afternoon, should not change to midnight—And though Louis had waited, still he could hardly see. Less shadow, then, more a fog—a miasma—sheathed the area.

Childishly, he turned and looked back and saw daylight framed brightly, in slender ovals, between the nearest trees. Out there, less than six meters away, lay sunburnt fields and open pasture. And yet—though the glow of day stayed visible—it did not, even faintly, reflect into the forest. Incredibly, not one single shaft of daylight pierced the gloom.

Above, boughs heavy with needles and black as ink crossed and wove against each other. Tiny flecks of sky were to be glimpsed, but they were opaque and remote. On the forest's floor not a fragment, not a splinter of light had fallen. "A—strange spot," said Marcellin. Did his voice tremble? Was he acting?

"Yes, it is," said Louis.

"I think," said Marcellin, "it *would* be easy to be lost here."

"No doubt."

"But we are brave, bold fellows. And you, Louis, bravest of all, so you shall be our leader." Louis regarded Marcellin, who now smiled again, with utmost malice. "Courage, my valiant leader. Lead on!"

It was obvious enough what was in Marcellin's mind. Louis was to be made, still at gunpoint, to move away ahead of the other two. No doubt they would soon sidle off and leave the forest, for here, despite all misgivings, the way back to the fields was yet in view, and so it must—surely be possible to get out there. But Louis would be forced to go deeper in, and thus might lose himself, being only a tradesman's son, an upstart, an idiot.

Yet, too, Louis had noted that Marcellin at least partly believed in the legend of the forest.

How he must hate me! In his heart he really wishes me to be slaughtered here, and so never return.

However, if by going on, he might in the end avoid Marcellin and the servant, Louis was prepared to obey.

Accordingly, he strode briskly forward along one of the smoky avenues, not once now looking back.

He tried to measure his progress in time as well as in distance. He counted minutes in his head, one minute, then two, stalking along the corridor between the trees.

But the forest began, even so soon, to confuse him. Though he could hardly see them, the trunks of the pines, crenelated and barbarous, soared up like pillars in some macabre church. Yew trees like black bears crouched across adjacent vistas, other coniferous trees, also dark and thick furred, struggled up between, sometimes swaying a little at some unseen, unfelt current of air. The undergrowth was sparse. Here and there, a skeletal bush, a dead bramble.

No birds called. And everything always the same, as if—as if in passing each column or blot of tree, Louis walked in an unnoticed

All evidence of external light was gone.
The smothered cracks of day that had showed between
the first trees were no longer to be seen.

circle, and so passed each one again, and then again, round and round—even though the avenue was itself in fact, unnaturally, as straight as a road.

After three minutes, Louis stopped and pretended to ease the cuff of his right boot.

He had heard no more from his vile companions.

They seemed to have disappeared into the substance of the pines. He supposed—and prayed—they had now retreated.

So then, presently, he did turn and looked back the way he had come.

All evidence of external light was gone. The smothered cracks of day that had showed between the first trees were no longer to be seen. Only the avenue could be made out, and not very clearly, stretching along its straight, pillared line. And no one was there. The evil Marcellin and the disgusting Jeannot, unable to decide between viciousness and unease, had apparently made off.

Well, it was no great thing, was it? Louis had not deviated from the path. He need only retrace his steps along the aisle, and he would come, after three or four minutes, to the forest's edge, where daylight had formerly showed—and still must. He might then linger a little, to be sure his tormentors had really gone. And after that, emerge, and go up the road again to the inn, which should not take

him more than two hours Notions that Marcellin might be lying in wait for him along the route, Louis dismissed He was beginning to think after all he had been unwise to give in to a bully For all Marcellin was his future wife's brother, Louis decided if any further threat was tried, he would throw off his coat and make a fight of it, pistol or no

He was about halfway back along the avenue and had not yet identified any glimpse of daylight through the trees ahead, when a curious sound came out of the thunderous silence of the forest

It was a sort of prolonged whining note At first he took it for some mechanical noise—of a bellows, or cartwheel, away across the fields Then it seemed it must be the cry of a small animal in a snare. It went on and on, sometimes becoming louder, falling off, beginning once more

Louis halted. The noise was unpleasant. It set his teeth on edge He wished it would stop, for now it seemed very loud indeed—

Next moment the whining shattered into a pistol shot—and then a duet of screams They were the most appalling thing he had ever heard, frankly indescribable, combining a kind of guttural choking with high, irresistible shrills of enormous pain and fear

Sweat burst out all over Louis's body His guts churned and he thought he would vomit. He wished only to run away, to bury himself deep in the ground and so hear the dreadful outcry no longer.

But then, the ice-cold thought sliced through his panic. *That is cunning Marcellin, and Jeannot too They are copying the stories, reproducing the awful shrieks of the tales*

tinued to judge to be the way back to the road, Louis *found* Marcellin and Jeannot

It was actually quite remarkable that he did so, and had he been even a few minutes, indeed a few seconds, later, certainly he would not have done For there was not much left of them.

Louis stood rooted to the ground—as maybe the trees were not—glaring at what lay across the track two long heaps of rusty, grayish dust, shining a little, and so able to be seen

At the end of each of these mounds lay a pair of skeletal feet, unshod, all bone. At the other end, a face rested eyelessly, like a mask, upon a blob of darkness—all that persisted of either head or skull

But even as Louis bent over them, his own eyes starting from his own head, as if red-hot nails drove them out, the bone feet and the masks of papery skin dissolved to ash, and in an unheard eddy of wind, blew off and away among the trees

BETWEEN THE COLUMNS OF THE PINES, LOUIS RAN HE DIVED AND sprang and galloped. When he must rest, panting, he crouched low against the barren earth of the forest, among its arched, craggy roots. As soon as he was able, again he leapt forward and on like a hunted deer

Yet, as even Louis understood, he was clever, no fool And he knew all this running was of no use whatsoever

A bleak thirst assailed him. He chewed his tongue to release moisture, not wanting even to take up a bit of the bark or the tiny peb-

He did not weep. And only once did he pray to God. But, being no fool, he sensed even God was shut out of this forest.

They wanted to scare Louis out of his wits, and had almost done so He shook himself

Let them howl, then, if they must He would be patient

The noises ended abruptly. Probably they had hurt their throats

Louis gave them fifteen more minutes, counted out in his head, before completing his return journey along the avenue to the edge of the wood.

THERE WAS NO LIGHT IT HAD BEEN CRUSHED. AND WHAT HE HAD TAKEN for the first trees, though he walked forward into them with the determination of the desperate, did not, now, open on to the fields Nor were they the first trees.

Had he taken a wrong turning? It was not possible He had not left the avenue Unless . Had the sameness of the pines and yews deceived him? Had he somehow gone astray?

He must have done It was the only answer

Except for one other answer he would not consider Which was that the trees themselves had somehow *altered*, shifting to close an open path

I will not give in to superstition, even though I feel it I will not be beaten by old stories and old trees, nor even by that devil Marcellin

Soon after this, moving cautiously forward in the direction he considered to be the way back to the road, Louis *found* Marcellin and Jeannot

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A bleak thirst assailed him. He chewed his tongue to release moisture, not wanting even to take up a bit of the bark or the tiny pebbles, which were occasionally lying about under the trees, to suck on. He did not weep And only once he prayed to God. But, being no fool, he sensed even God was shut out of this forest It was a department of Hell

Although there had been absolutely no proper light at any time, in the end, the *unseen* illumination ebbed quite away And then the forest was as black as if he were inside a locked chest, hung closely with thick, black draperies Outside this filthy place, worldly night must have arrived. Louis felt despair, for he guessed he would never see night, nor day, again.

Despite all that, so far he had evaded the things—the demons or vampires, whatever they were—of the forest. But he was aware too, that perhaps, just as Marcellin had, they were playing with him. Teasing

After the true ebony black of night soaked through the trees, Louis ceased to run. He only walked, creeping along, sometimes biting on his hand, as he had done in childhood, when afraid of the big dogs of his father's country house.

But he tried not to think of his father, or his mother, both of whom he loved, nor Célie, whom he had begun to love He tried to beat his mind into finding a solution to all this.

He would, of course, never discover a path from the forest. That

much was obvious. While whatever lurked here, toying with him, was only waiting for some self-chosen, special moment to emerge and do to him —oh God—what had been done to Marcellin and Jeannot—and to all the rest.

Finally, exhaustion covered Louis like the night. He sat down, having no choice, his back against a tree. He was so weary and *repulsed* by everything that had happened to him that he was almost ready to confront death. Not quite.

Sitting, he felt something inside his coat grate against his side. He put his hand on it and drew it out. Forgotten in bewilderment-flint and tinder-the means to make light and *fire*.

Louis sat there, holding these ingredients of civilization in his hand. He did not think in words, but in pictures. The pictures were simple, of a dry summer forest set alight and *burning*.

It was then, in the instant of revelation, that the touch came on his shoulder. *First* on his shoulder, then encircling all his body, his torso, legs, arms, his face. A soft touch, or sequence of touches, almost loving, almost amorous. He did not even flinch. He struck, with one rapid motion, the flint and a spray of flame split the dark.

Louis saw, by the light from his tinder box, great arms embracing him, long hands of longer fingers, stiff and glittering hair, *mouths* like those of gigantic living statues—

No eyes. They had none. Had no need of them.

It was—the trees—the trees themselves. Nothing lived *in* the forest. It was the forest that *lived*. They grouped around him, rank on rank, circle on circle, rootless, pressing in, spreading down their needled boughs, uncoiling their trunks like serpents. Wooden claws caressed him, hair of pine needles scratched eagerly at his face. Faceless heads, lacking eyes, opened their mouths and breathed in his essence with adoring greed.

The forest. The forest was the vampire.

From the throat of Louis issued one long, wailing cry. But in that instant, he cast the fire away from the tinder, and like a star he saw it plunge, there among the jumble of the half-seen serpents, their thirsty needles and searching spikes.

As a new scarlet light began to bloom, like the sun fallen *upward* from below, through the floor of the forest, Louis prized himself from that unthinkable union. And as the mouths lapped and snapped after him, he flung himself once more away.

Over boulevards lined by clutching, snatching things that grasped at him and lost him, *lost* him, torn, milked like a goat from the pastures, *bled*, he nipped his way, tossing the flowers of fire again and again among them, until the talons of their loveless, hungry love withdrew.

He saw their empire wither in the flame. He saw them consumed. Yet too, he felt himself dissolving. He ran screaming on legs made only of dust.

Even so, by the vivid light of the conflagration, Louis hurtled on, the roar of a huge forest fire all about him, amid the limbs of demons disintegrating. A rain of sparks descended.

He tumbled out suddenly—out, sobbing and praying—out—out—onto the hard stones of—a road. A road. While at his back, towers blazed red, and ruby fields dazzled, and purple smoke streamed into the sky and drowned, in its rivers, the moon.

Louis lay face-down on the road, crying. Sparks went on showering over him. They scorched his hands and the back of his neck, but did not hurt. Nor were his clothes burnt, nor torn; he was amazed to see it, even through his tears and hysteria.

He thought the local villagers would soon come hurrying now, if only to try to save their crops from the wild arson of the nearest fields. But no one came. No one. They were too frightened.

The fire—the forest—was a crimson cloud that bellowed up into the sky. Where there had been silence was a symphony of rage and agony.

LOUIS GOT UP IN A WHILE. HE TRUDGED AWAY FROM IT, ALONG THE road, his head hanging, stupefied and near to collapse. Nothing seemed real to him. Not even what he had done.

It was almost midnight when he reached the inn, or so he thought. He had journeyed slowly, and the walk had seemed to take him years. Lights still shone, however, in the inn's main room, and in several other chambers above. Louis was duly surprised none of the people here looked out to see what the other light was, blaring ten miles back along the road, where the forest went on burning.

Louis himself cast one last look in that direction. The lower sky was flushed, the stars there inflamed. Then he pushed open the inn door.

The main room contained a large drunken party of some kind. Men raised their glasses and bawled out patriotic songs. In the shadowy corners of the room, beyond the candlelight, a few other patrons were quietly sitting. Louis saw the group of soldiers he had observed on the first evening he stayed there, and then the old gentleman in his strange antique clothes, who had offered him the book of legends. This ancient man perched by the low summer fire, reading, but now he lifted his eyes and met Louis's glance. The soldiers too, Louis was aware, had turned his way. Yet the drunks at their festivity had interest it seemed in none but themselves and each other.

Now the innkeeper and two of his assistants hurried in, bearing jugs of hot brandy, fruit, and sweets.

Louis attempted in vain to catch their eye. He sighed. He would have to wait.

It was then that the old man got up and hobbled toward him.

"So you have come back, monsieur.

"It seems I have," answered Louis.

"I believed you would. Despite this, I tried to warn you. Yet, the very fact that I was able to do so, to speak to you at all, indicated, alas, that already, probably, your fate was sealed."

"I beg your pardon?" Louis saw the innkeeper approaching and hailed him again.

To his dismay, but somehow not to his astonishment, the innkeeper paid Louis no attention, simply walking straight by him and out of the door. Lamely, Louis gazed at the old man in the old-fashioned coat. "The forest burns," Louis said. "Has no one seen the purple light in the sky?"

"I have, monsieur. *They* have." The old man gestured graciously toward the soldiers in the corner, who in turn bowed to him. "But it has burned before, the Forest of Arlinacque. Or rather, we have thought it has. For the forest, alone of all things, can never die. Nor can it ever be left hungry."

Total stillness flowed from the night and settled within Louis like a sort of poison.

"What are you telling me?"

"I am telling you that this is now your home. As I once did, as our friends the soldiers once did, also, and as others have done, who now exist inside this inn, you entered the forest and the forest took you. But that is over. There is no more to fear. Those persons that the trees kill, when they are wicked, they go elsewhere, and those who are saints, they too, if to another destination. But we who are only ordinary men, we come back to this inn. And the inn is full of us, dear monsieur. Look about you and see." Louis looked. He saw. They were everywhere, at the edges of the room, on the stairs, moving between the shadows and the candles. Old and young, wealthy and poor, male and female. They were nodding to him, smiling not unkindly, sorry for him, for the shock he experienced, now, which they too, long ago, had also felt. While in the center of the room, brilliantly lit, the boisterous, fleshy, *mortal* drinkers saluted each other and saw *no one else at all*.

In a misery that seemed, even this early, quite familiar, Louis watched, in his mind's eye, Célie slipping away from him, his parents, his youth, his future, the world itself.

"I did not, then," he whispered, "escape. I thought I had."

"You did not escape. None ever do."

"Oh God, what has become of me?"

The old man replied, in the most gentle of voices, "It is nothing so very unusual, dear monsieur. You are only dead."

MAYBE IT'S THE EMPTY PLACES INSIDE US THAT MAKE US SEEK OUT THE EMPTY PLACES OUTSIDE. OR MAYBE WE JUST LIKE FRESH AIR.

sight. Jayn judged him to be an inch or two shorter than Jayn's own six-foot height.

"Who are you? What do you want with me?"

"My name is Timon, and I have need of your professional services. That being the case, obviously I intend you no harm."

Jayn wasn't convinced. "How do I know you're alone?"

Timon smiled. "Obviously, you *don't* know. I could be surrounded by archers waiting for you to appear, or some other such rot, but do you really think the bounty on your head is so great for me to go to all that trouble? I'm alone, Jayn of Laksas. Either believe me or don't, but the alternative is for you stay in there and starve. I can assure you it's far warmer and more comfortable out here."

The man's name sounded vaguely familiar, but Jayn couldn't place it. He peered cautiously out of the rocks, but no arrows twanged out of the night, there was no sound at all except for a faint crackle from the campfire and the small sounds of frogs and insects that Jayn would normally expect at this time of night.

"Your name is somewhat familiar. Do I know you?"

"I doubt it, but you may have heard of me. I'm usually known as Timon the Black."

For several long moments Jayn just stared at the smaller man. After a little while he finally remembered to breathe.

"No offense, but I don't deal with wizards," Jayn said a little unsteadily.

Timon looked a little surprised. He also looked a little relieved. "You believe me? Most people would need convincing, you know. Forgive my immodesty, but that's no small claim I just made."

"You tracked me for a considerable time without my realizing it, and forgive *my* immodesty, but there are not many people who could do that. Besides, I can't imagine what advantage you'd gain by such a wild story."

Timon nodded. "You're as clever as your reputation. Good. We can skip the tedious proofs and arguments and get down to what matters."

"No, we can't. Didn't you hear what I said? I don't deal with wizards."

Not that Jayn had anything against them as a group, he considered wizards self-sufficient and untrustworthy, which were traits he respected. It was more that; beyond the two traits already mentioned, he didn't understand them. He didn't know what they wanted or why they wanted it and, in Jayn's line of work, that was very dangerous. Greed, Jayn understood. And lust, and avarice, and spitefulness and a host of other petty sins—those all made sense. Yet, if the stories were true, Timon the Black had committed some of the worst crimes imaginable simply because he wanted to, and he could. For instance, he was reputed to have kidnapped a princess of Murushe and murdered the hero prince who came to rescue her, all on a whim. Such a person was capable of literally anything.

"You can decide after we've spoken, but refusing to listen is not an option," Timon said, then added, "Well, not a good one, anyway."

Jayn put his hands on his hips. "Timon, I know your reputation as I trust you know mine. How do you plan—"

Timon didn't even wait until he'd finished speaking. Thinking back on it, Jayn still wasn't exactly sure what had happened. All he knew was that there was a blur of motion that might or might not have been Timon's right hand. The next moment a small ash tree not ten feet away from Jayn burst into flame and exploded with a sound like thunder. Jayn found himself on the ground, his ears ringing. It took him a few moments to be certain he was still alive. He got up, slowly. He would have run, if he thought for a moment that would have worked.

"That was a warning," Timon said calmly. "And, since I'm rather fond of trees as a rule, I don't think I'll bother with another."

As he spoke, Timon continued what looked like preparations for tea as if nothing at all had happened.

"Ahh…" Jayn suddenly found himself at a loss for words.

Timon, on the other hand, had no such loss. "I have plenty of tea and fire both, and I promise you that we're going to share one or the other this night. Which shall it be?"

"I'll take the tea," Jayn said.

Timon nodded. "Good choice."

THE CHOICE, AT LEAST IN THE SHORT TERM, TURNED OUT better than Jayn had suspected. Not only was he still alive, but his insistent host made excellent tea as well. Jayn usually preferred something stronger, but he could not remember when he'd tasted better.

Jayn regarded his cup thoughtfully. "I would almost give up wine for this."

"Each has its place," Timon said, "though a good pot of tea is usu-

TIMON LOOKED A LITTLE SURPRISED. HE ALSO LOOKED A LITTLE RELIEVED. "YOU BELIEVE ME? MOST PEOPLE WOULD NEED CONVINCING, YOU KNOW."

ally harder to find. One reason I make my own. So. Have you considered my proposal?"

Jayn nodded. "Yes, and all I can say is that it is a very puzzling one." He eyed the package Timon had produced. It wasn't much to look at—little more than a small bundle wrapped in plain cloth, about the size of both of Jayn's open hands put side to side. Then again, it wasn't the package that puzzled him, although of course he was curious about it. Rather, it was what Timon wanted done with it.

"You want me to sneak into the king's fortress at Wylandia and leave this package in the nursery?"

"That is correct. If you wish, you may steal some identifiable item from the palace as proof of your exploit, so your reputation is enhanced at the same time. We both win. So. Will you do it?"

"We haven't discussed terms."

"Quite right," Timon conceded. "I could just threaten you, but I've found that a reward and a club get better results than a club alone." He named a figure. Jayn just stared at him for several long moments while his tea began to grow cold. Timon, for his part, drank the rest of his with apparent satisfaction and poured another cup.

"You're joking," Jayn said finally.

"Then why aren't you laughing?" Timon asked. "I tell very good jokes when the mood hits me. At the moment the mood does not."

"But… I could live like a king on that much gold!"

"One of the poorer ones." Timon said. "And not for long. Most likely you'll find a way to gamble it all away or otherwise squander it."

Jayn raised an eyebrow. "Oh? And what makes you think I would be so foolish with my money?"

Timon smiled "Because your history suggests that you don't really care about the gold, Jayn. It's the challenge and the reputation that goes with successful exploits of thievery that inspire you. You feel you have not gained the reputation you deserve for all your efforts. If there's more to you than that, it's not commonly known."

Jayn was going to argue the point until it occurred to him that Timon might have said nothing less than the plain truth. The truth

always made Jayn uncomfortable, it wasn't quite so flexible as a good lie. "Even so, why offer so much? If what you say is true I would accept your challenge for much less."

"Because I do not wish to offer 'much less.' My reasons are my own."

"Is there an enchantment on the gift? Will it harm the child?"

Timon shrugged. "Does that matter?"

"I'm a thief, not an assassin. Besides, if you do mean to harm the little prince, I might not wish my part in the matter to be known. Gold and reputation together might not be sufficient shield against a king's revenge."

Timon nodded. "Point taken. Be at ease—my intention is not to harm the child. If it was, I'd have no qualms about saying so, and 'persuading' you to act against your instincts. Do you doubt this?"

"Even so . . . if I agree to perform this task, how do I know you'll keep your word?"

"Because, at least on this one point, you needn't depend on my word." Timon reached into his pack and pulled out a heavy leather bag. This he extended and dropped within Jayn's reach. "Payment strictly in advance. Count it if you want."

Frowning, Jayn untied the bag. He reached far enough down among the gold coins to satisfy himself that, even if the rest of the bag from his fingertips to the bottom held nothing but lead disks, he would still be rich enough to buy a small town and everyone in it. He bit one coin just for show, but he already knew the gold was real.

"You must think I'm a fool," he said.

"I was withholding judgment," Timon said. "Why do you say so?"

"Because what's to stop you from blasting me like that poor tree after I do this task for you?"

"Not a blessed thing," Timon said affably. "Likewise there's nothing to stop me from doing the same if you refuse, or accept and then try to escape from your obligations. Now. Which two of those three eventualities do you consider most likely to annoy me?"

Jayn sighed. "Are there any conditions to this enterprise you haven't told me about?"

"Just one," Timon said. "I'll be accompanying you to the fortress. Once your task is complete—or you're killed in the attempt—we go our separate ways once we're safely out of Wylandia."

"I work alone," Jayn said. Which was true usually, but he mostly just didn't relish the idea of Timon being anywhere near him. The man was pleasant enough company, but Jayn thought that, perhaps, that fire trick might be harder to accomplish at greater distance.

The magician shook his head. "Not to impugn your considerable skills, but you'll never get into the fortress without my help. Consider this protecting my investment."

Again Jayn considered his options and again came to the inevitable conclusion that he didn't have any. "Very well, but just so you know I don't trust you."

Timon just smiled. "Then you're not a fool. Good. That will help."

THERE WERE TWO KNOWN PASSES THROUGH THE WHITE Mountains, the Pilgrim's Road and the Serpent's Path. The Pilgrim's Road was jointly maintained and patrolled by Wylandia and Morushe and was the main route of what uneasy commerce existed between the two kingdoms. The Serpent's Path was little more than a mountain trail. It had watchtowers and a beacon system on each end in the event that any armed groups attempted to use it to catch either kingdom unaware, but was otherwise left alone. Jayn wasn't terribly surprised when this was the route they took to Wylandia. It was easy enough for two men traveling lightly to slip past the watch undetected; not quite so easy to make the other end in one piece.

"You do realize that bandits—and worse—reside along the Serpent's Path? It's a natural refuge for the desperate and predatory."

"Yes," Timon said. "The Pilgrim's Road is much easier and safer, but people tend to want to know your business when you take that way. Don't worry, Jayn. We won't have any trouble."

Jayn wasn't convinced of that until the second day after they slipped past the southern watchtower. A large group of very unpleasant-looking men appeared on a ridge overlooking the pass. Timon merely acknowledged them with a wave of his hand and they just as quickly vanished.

Almost, Jayn thought, *hastily.*

"Just what is Timon the Black's arrangement with those men?"

"A simple one. They don't interfere with my business and I don't rip the flesh from their bones. You'd be surprised at how reasonable men can be when the alternative is explained to them."

Jayn thought about it. "It worked with me, and that's a fact. Please don't misunderstand me—the destruction of that tree was intimidating, but that was one tree. Could you really kill all of them? Are you really that powerful?"

Timon just shrugged. "You of all people should understand the value of reputation, Jayn. Mine is such that they believe that I can and would. Therefore, I don't have to."

"That's not exactly an answer," Jayn said.

"Since this particular answer would require proof, I hope for your sake that you never receive one."

The next morning Timon looked a little unhappy. "There's been a new development that may complicate your task."

Jayn, who hadn't quite managed to find a spot of ground without something hard and unyielding under it, wasn't in the best of moods himself. "What is it?"

"The Queen of Wylandia will be in residence at the palace during our incursion. She was expected to accompany her husband on a state visit to Morushe, but apparently there was some . . . disagreement between them. Since the way to the nursery is through her private chambers, this may complicate matters."

Jayn shrugged. "It would be better if she were not there, true, but I've ransacked entire rooms without waking the occupants . . . wait a moment. How do you know this?"

"Because I'm a magician," Timon said. "And finding the hidden is what we do."

After a breakfast of hard bread and cheese they were soon on their way again. It was a long time before either of them spoke again, and it was Jayn who broke the silence.

"You know what I think? I think you knew about the queen's plans all along, and you merely announced it at the appropriate time to impress me."

Timon smiled. "Interesting theory, and certainly a clever way to create the illusion of true magic without actually producing any. There's only one flaw in your hypothesis."

"Which is?"

"It presumes that I have a need to impress you. Jayn, you already know what I will do to you if you betray me. What more is required?"

"We still have a few days before we reach Wylandia. How do you know I won't slit your throat while you sleep? There's an end to that threat. I'm not saying I would, mind, but why isn't it an option?"

Timon smiled. "Let us say for the sake of argument that you have a point. In which case it is in your interest to test the limits of my power, yes?"

"I suppose that's true," Jayn said.

Timon shrugged. "All right, but do remember. I did warn you."

Despite Timon's ominous implication, nothing unusual happened for the rest of that day. Jayn and Timon made good time along the Serpent Path, despite the fact that they were traveling mostly uphill. The way was clear, the weather was mild, and the bandits, if any, were keeping well out of sight. They reached the highest point on their route by evening and made camp once more. From their vantage point they could see the plains of Wylandia in the distance and the backbone of the White Mountains stretching out to either side.

The air was thin and cool; both Timon and Jayn kept close to the fire. It wasn't much of a fire; dead wood was rather scarce in the higher levels of the pass, but it lasted long enough to heat a quick supper and now its dying coals provided at least some warmth. So

it was with considerable reluctance that Jayn crawled out of his blankets, crossed the pass, and clambered up a slight rise on the left side of the trail. It wasn't until the campfire was out of sight that it occurred to him that he didn't have the faintest notion of why he had done so. He looked out in a distance seemingly composed of equal parts shadowed earth and brilliantly shining stars

"What am I doing here?"

"I called you, Jayn."

Timon was standing right next to him. Jayn jumped backward three paces and landed in a crouch, his dagger ready

"What do you mean, 'called me'? What trick is this?"

"Just that," Timon said. "I called you out of your sleep, but left your body where it was. I didn't need that part."

Jayn crept back to the edge of the ridge and looked down toward the camp. It was still there, as was he himself. Jayn saw the still form wrapped in blankets, knew it for his own.

"What have you done to me?"

"Nothing. Yet."

"Am I dreaming?"

"In a way. But ask yourself, Jayn—if I am privy to your dreams, how are you going to keep anything hidden from me? You have no choice here, Jayn, other than to do what I require."

Timon continued to look out toward Wylandia or up at the stars, Jayn couldn't quite tell which. After a moment or two Timon spoke again, but he wasn't talking about missions or proof or anything of the sort. "I love places like this, Jayn. We'll be gone in a moment or two and it will be as it was. Wylandia goes to war in a generation or doesn't. Morushe becomes one kingdom with Borasur, or doesn't. Large events to us, but to these mountains? Nothing. That's what I love about the empty places of the world, places with few people and little to see save earth, sky, mountains and cold, cold stars. They help me keep matters in perspective."

Jayn didn't say anything for a moment, since he didn't have any idea what Timon was talking about. He kept his attention on what, as he saw it, was the matter at hand. "If I'm dreaming, how do I know that any of this is real? Your presence, what I'm seeing now, all could be just the workings of my fevered mind."

"You're a stubborn one, Jayn."

Jayn met Timon's gaze evenly. "I'm a hard man, wizard. I have to be. You are generous with your gold but you could take that away from me. I can't trust you, as I said. How can there be any certainty of any kind between us?"

Timon nodded. "A fair question. Which I presume would be answered if I demonstrate that you're not going to take me by surprise? That is the case, I'm afraid. My precautions are such that I'll know your intent before you do."

Jayn sniffed danger like a deer in a meadow, but couldn't think of anything to say that was as remotely plausible as the truth. "A demonstration would help," Jayn admitted. "Though one that leaves me both alive and functioning would be in both our interests."

"I'll take that into consideration," Timon said.

"So … what will you do? Summon lightning? Raise a demon from the bowels of the earth?"

"You believe that you're dreaming," Timon said. "So if I were to do any of those things you either would not remember or would quite rightly explain the marvel as part of your dream, where such wonders are common. No, I must arrange something more … solid. Look to the east, what do you see?"

Jayn glanced in that direction. "A faint glow. Dawn is coming."

"Almost here," Timon said. "You'll awaken in a little while, and you're not going to remember any of this at first. You're going to run thirty paces farther along the trail and then stop and look to the right. Only then will you remember, and you will recall everything we've said tonight."

Jayn frowned. "That's it?"

"Just be grateful that it's enough. Now wake up."

Jayn awoke by the cold ashes of the campfire. Timon was nowhere to be seen. Jayn pulled his blankets off and sat up. He looked around carefully, but there was still no sign of the magician. Jayn assumed Timon had sought privacy to relieve himself and, very briefly, considered doing the same before the implication of Timon's absence sank in.

Now's my chance.

Jayn rolled up his bedding as quickly as he could, packed up his heavy pack, started down the trail. He had gone exactly thirty paces when he skidded to a stop before he even realized he was doing so. He looked to the right and there was Timon, leaning against a large stone.

"What kept you?"

THEY SLIPPED PAST THE WYLANDIAN WATCHTOWER ON THE fourth day. That proved very easy. The rough stone wall blocking the north end of the pass was built to prevent a large force from crossing quickly, and give the watchmen time to light their beacons and give warning. It did little to prevent two very stealthy men from climbing over under cover of darkness. As he reached the top of the wall, Jayn could see the two watchmen huddled by a small brazier near the parapet of their tower.

"I wonder what they're being punished for?" Jayne said aloud, though he kept his voice too low to carry.

Timon, who Jayn had come to grudgingly understand was even more rumble than himself, was waiting for him on top of the wall. "Punished? What makes you think so?"

"Out here? Isolated for months at a time with nothing to do but stare into nothing? I'd go mad."

"I have it on good authority that men volunteer for this duty. I would think that someone of your background would appreciate the lure of solitude."

Jayn shook his head. "I appreciate being unencumbered. That's not the same thing as being alone."

"Quite right," Timon said. "And yet, to some, this sort of duty is ideal. Everyone searches for what they need, Jayn. You, me, those men in the tower. It's no surprise that we're not all after the same thing."

They climbed down carefully. Timon led Jayn to what looked like an animal path through the underbrush, he was able to walk upright and still stay concealed from the watchmen. They were well away from both the wall and the tower before Jayn spoke again. "So what is it you're looking for, Timon?"

The magician frowned. "Why do you want to know?"

Jayn shrugged. "Just curious. We have both miles and time to kill."

"I'll answer that question," Timon said, "if you'll do the same."

Jayn grunted. "I thought you had me sorted out already; you played me like a drum at our first meeting."

Timon dismissed that. "I understand your immediate motivations well enough to explain why you do what you do. The excitement of a challenge, the thirst for reputation … simple enough on the surface. But is that really all there is to you, Jayn? A thief hungry for reputation?"

Jayn shrugged. "Isn't that enough?"

"That's not for me to answer, Jayn. I'll answer my own question instead: what I want is to make a difference."

"I must say you don't seem particular as to what *sort* of difference, seeing as how your list of crimes is far longer and certainly more lethal than mine. I steal, but that's all."

Timon raised an eyebrow. "A moral harangue from a thief?"

Jayn sighed. "Just because I cross the line now and then doesn't mean I don't know a line exists. I never steal from those who can't afford the loss and I've never killed anyone except in self-defense, even when good sense suggested that slitting a throat was in my best interests. I am quite moral, Timon. In my own way."

"Interesting notion. Perhaps we should test that sometime."

"WELL, NOW THIS IS DEFINITELY A CHALLENGE," JAYN SAID.

What was euphemistically referred to as the Wylandian summer palace was actually a fortified castle set on a mountain ridge so high

and sheer that it looked like a wall constructed by some long vanished giant. A section of the ridge had collapsed in a past age and the castle had been built near the edge, so the fortress was guarded on three sides by sheer hundred-foot cliffs. The only real approach was along the ridge itself, defended by a massive curtain wall and a sliding gate which, judging from the relative size of the guards near it, was at least twenty feet square.

Timon and Jayn sat at a rough table at an inn in Kandan, a bustling village at the foot of the mountain, near an unshuttered window that gave them a good look at the castle. Fortunately—or more likely, planned ahead by Timon—it was the second of two annual horse fairs held there on the border of the plains where the hardy Wylandian duns, much prized in the south and elsewhere, were traded. No one took much notice of them, as the town was normally filled with travelers during the fair.

"Pity there are no rooms available," Timon said. "It would have been nice not to sleep on the ground for a change."

"I don't consider a bed more than likely stuffed with fleas much of an improvement," Jayn said. "Worse, someone else's fleas." He lifted his flagon again, then sighed. "Good food and ale, though."

"Too good," Timon said. "Keep your wits about you, since you enter the castle tonight."

"Why tonight?"

"I have my reasons. Let it go at that."

In the true sense. Rather, it appeared that a boulder had been torn from its matrix during the past collapse; it occurred to Jayn that the landmark rock that looked like a cow pat could have been the original stone, now weathered down and buried in soft earth. The break in the rock wall only went about four feet into the cliff face and abruptly ended.

"What do we do now? Climb? In the dark? We didn't even bring a rope!"

"Actually, I did, but we won't need it until near the end," Timon said. "Get inside."

"This hole in the rock? But it doesn't go anywhere—"

Jayn didn't quite finish, because Timon slipped past him and poked a section of the roof with a stout stick he'd picked up outside, and the stone moved, rocking gently as if precisely balanced. "Shift the stone, and be careful. It should slide to the left."

The section of stone looked like all the others. There were cracks visible, but there were cracks visible everywhere. Jayn put his hands against the stone and pushed, gingerly at first but then with more force. A slab of granite just over a foot wide and twice as long lifted off the roof of the fissure. It took a couple of tries, but Jayn managed to push it to the side. Then Timon lit the lantern with a touch of one finger and handed it to Jayn.

"Set this up in there so we can see, then climb up."

Jayn lifted the lantern into the fissure and the almost absolute

JAYNE DIDN'T QUITE FINISH, BECAUSE TIMON SLIPPED PAST HIM AND POKED A SECTION OF THE ROOF WITH A STOUT STICK HE'D PICKED UP OUTSIDE, AND THE STONE MOVED, ROCKING GENTLY AS IF PRECISELY BALANCED.

Jayn nodded toward the gate. "Lovely. And now that we're here, would you mind telling me your plan to get in? I'm a very good thief, but I'm neither a magician nor a bird. I must say it looks quite impossible from here."

Timon smiled. "I'll do better than tell you, I'll show you. Yet you probably won't like it. I certainly don't."

That evening they slipped out of Kandan and made their way toward the base of the cliffs. The fields near the far end of the ridge were scattered with massive boulders, some as large as a house, apparently left over from that ancient rockfall. At times Jayn felt as if he was walking through a forest of fat stone trees, but at least they gave good cover, even though they didn't yet dare light the lantern. Timon had brought the base of the cliff itself was a jumble of broken stones, scrubby pines, and bramble that made progress both slow and painful. Though Jayn was a little mollified to note that Timon, even though he apparently knew the way, wasn't doing much better.

"You're right," Jayn said, after plucking a dead bramble cane from the back of his hand and pausing to lick the blood. "I don't like this."

"Then you're really not going to like it when the going turns nasty," Timon said, pulling a thorn from his thumb. "But at least we'll be out of this brush soon. Turn to the left when you reach that rock that looks like a cow pat."

Jayn did as he was told and found, if not exactly a path, a lessening of the undergrowth. He followed that with Timon bringing up the rear and came to a place where the stony ground turned to more solid rock, giving the pine and brambles fewer places to take root. The rock surface slanted upward to reach the base of the cliff face and there Jayn found a gaping hole in the rock about six feet wide and nearly as high. He glanced up and could just barely make out a tower from the castle high above them.

It can't be as simple as this ...

Jayn peered into the cave and realized that it was not a cave at all, but blackness retreated a bit, to reveal a wider fissure in the rock. It was easy enough to get a grip on either side of the opening and pull himself up. "Do you need a—"

Again, Jayn didn't get a chance to finish, for in an instant Timon was standing right next to him. Timon very carefully slid the cover stone back into place and then picked up the lantern and held it high.

They stood on a shelf of bare rock about six feet across, just a little wider than the cave below. The fissure ended in another blank wall about fifteen paces farther into the ridge. To the left was another wall of flat granite that reached farther than Jayn could see in the weak light, as did the wall to their right. The difference was, the wall on the right was marked with ledges and broken stones that formed a natural stairway up toward the blackness far above them. The air was close and still, and there was a musty, faintly unpleasant odor that Jayn couldn't quite identify.

"Does no one else know about this fissure?" Jayn asked.

"Keep your voice down, please. Sound tends to travel here." Timon said in a whisper. "But yes, since it reaches all the way to the surface and the castle is built over it, many people know about it. What they don't know is that there's a way in from the cliff base."

"I imagine there are people who would pay to know that very important detail. Say ... the King of Wylandia? Or Morushe, or Bora sur, for that matter."

"No doubt," Timon said, affably.

"I'm making an implication," Jayn said, keeping his voice just about the level of a whisper.

"I know," Timon said. "The implication being that it might not be in my interest that this information be shared. And so it would therefore be more in my interest that you do not live to tell anyone, including any of the aforementioned Majesties. Or did I misunderstand you?"

Jayn looked at Timon. "No, I think you pretty much nailed that board to the floor."

The magician sighed. "Jayn, by your reasoning it's in my interest that you disappear after this task but, since you're carrying a large measure of my gold, we've already established that. Stop trying to give me reasons to kill you; they're irrelevant. I'll harm you if and only if I want or need to."

"That's not much reassurance."

"It's the best I can do under the circumstances. Now. Climb or die."

The smell Jayn had noticed when he first entered the fissure got stronger as they climbed. After about thirty feet or so there was very little doubt.

"Is that ..."

Timon's nose wrinkled in distaste. "Human excrement? Yes."

Farther up they came to a broad ledge created by an irregular crack in the stone. There they found a dunghill so regular and ordered that it almost looked as if it had been shoveled up just so. Cave insects and Jayn didn't want to imagine what else had discovered this lowly food source; the pile was almost writhing with life. Far overhead there was a faint light.

"As you may have surmised, this leads to the garderobe in the queen's apartments," Timon said. "The only reason the smell isn't worse is that it's only used by one person usually, her Majesty. Plus, the beetles and worms do a fair job of breaking the royal waste down to compost ... not that anything else would grow down here."

"But ... why turn the fissure into a latrine? They could be contaminating their wells!"

"There are no wells. They use a system of large-capacity cisterns. Given that, and the fact that this is not a normal cave and therefore has very little water to contaminate, the design makes perfect sense. I fancy the smell at the upper levels is hardly noticeable, and the pit is so large that it never has to be mucked out. In the builder's place I'd have done the same."

Despite Timon's expressed admiration, they moved more carefully after that. The natural stone steps that allowed them to climb the wall hadn't gone totally unblemished, and more than once they had to avoid coprolitic deposits of varying ages.

"After this, they'll likely smell me even if they don't see me," Jayn grumbled.

"It's a risk we'll just have to take," Timon said cheerfully.

As they approached the top of the wall Timon paused for a few moments and pulled out a parchment map. He found a clean spot on the stones and kneeled down to unfurl the map. Jayn leaned in so he could see.

"This is the floor plan for the level just above us. And here," he said, pointing to one end of a cluster of small rooms, "is where you'll emerge. The queen's bedchamber itself is here, and the nursery is on the other side. You can also reach the nursery through the hallway, but unlike the queen's own apartments, there will be guards there. If you can stay within these rooms without being discovered," he used his finger to draw an imaginary circle around the entire cluster, "you should be fine."

"And what if the queen is in her apartments?"

"I fancy she is, considering the hour. Use stealth," Timon said, then added pointedly, "and nothing else."

Jayn nodded. "Understood."

Not that he wanted to harm the queen of Wylandia or anyone, come to that, but being a thief meant, whenever possible, keeping your options both open and as plentiful as possible. You never knew when you might need another one.

There was a light, still, from above. Jayn recognized the distinctive flicker of a candle, shining down through an appropriately sized hole overhead. They were careful not to get directly below that hole, but when they reached as near to the top as the natural steps in the stone would take them, they were still about ten feet below the garderobe and about as many to the side. Timon reached into the bag slung over his shoulder and pulled out a length of rope and a grappling hook, its tines wrapped with cloth to muffle them. Thick wooden beams supported the rooms, and below those beams heavy braces had been set into either side of the stone. Timon aimed for the brace nearest to the garderobe and, after an expert twirl of the rope overhead, hooked it on the first try.

"Climb up and do what you came to do," Timon said. "I'll wait here until either you return or I know you've been caught."

"If I'm taken aren't you worried that I'll betray you?"

"No, because I'm certain you would, if you thought it would save your own skin, and why not? I'd do the same. Now go."

First Jayn handed his pack to Timon. "You know I can't climb with this."

"Someone more foolish might have tried, though. Don't worry; I'll keep it for you."

Jayn grinned. "Why should I worry?"

Jayn tested the rope. It was thinner than he would have preferred but surprisingly strong, and the hook was well placed. Jayn took a good grip and gently pushed away from the stone ledge. He swung drunkenly over empty space for several distinctly uncomfortable seconds before he managed to clamber up the rope and grip the brace. After that, climbing up was easy. He reached a point just under and behind the garderobe seat where he crouched, his feet securely planted in the lee of adjoining braces, and listened for several seconds. He heard nothing.

Her Majesty's just left a right light. How practical.

Jayn traced the edges of the seat. The opening of course was too small, but a slight push told him that the entire slab was simply sitting within the wooden frame, using its own weight to anchor it. He slowly straightened up, lifting the seat as he did. The seat was made of white marble, Jayn only recognized it because he had once stolen a small statue made entirely of the rare stone. It was, also, fairly heavy.

Nothing's too good for Her Majesty's royal butt, apparently. Must be cold, though.

When he was high enough to see that the garderobe was really empty, he very carefully set the seat aside on a section of bare wood on the bench that made up the frame for the slab and pulled himself up and into the small room. A thick candle burned unattended on a stone table on the left. It gave a weak but adequate light. The only exit was closed by a curtain instead of an actual door, for which Jayn was grateful. Iron hinges tended to squeak; something drapery generally did not do. Jayn carefully set the garderobe seat back in its place before he pulled the curtain aside and stepped into the next room. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Timon's been right so far.

The map had identified the room Jayn stood in as the queen's changing room. With what Jayn could see now, that appeared to be true. There was a tall linen press for bedding, several large chests for storage, and a fairly large glassed window on the outside wall to take advantage of whatever light might be available.

That glass must have cost a fortune, not to mention that marble garderobe. The horse trade must be more lucrative than I thought.

While it was true that Wylandian bred horses were much in demand, it was only now that Jayn was starting to understand the true wealth of Wylandia. The kings of Wylandia had long held the reputation of being fairly belligerent neighbors, though in truth most disputes tended to end as little more than border skirmishes. Still, there were a lot of them and it was these flare-ups that tended to be what people first thought of when the name "Wylandia" was mentioned, not the relative prosperity he had seen in both the castle and the village at the foot of the mountain.

Perhaps it is the kingdom's small size that makes it feisty. Or perhaps it is simply that ill tempered bastards tend to breed the same.

Jayn shrugged. Either way, it wasn't really his concern. He was close to fulfilling his obligation. After that he'd have to worry about Timon's true intentions, since the only other ways out of the castle were either down the cliff or out through the gate, and neither alternative looked any better than, if necessary, taking his chances with

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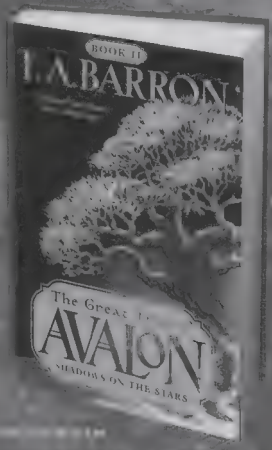

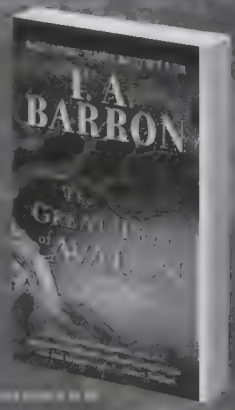

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ACE

Timon. Jayn crept to the second curtain that separated the changing room from the queen's bedchamber

The queen was not sleeping

Jayn peered through the curtain and froze in place. There were two candles burning on a small table, but that wasn't what worried him, the one in the garderobe suggested that her majesty might be afraid of the dark. He'd seen such often enough before. No, it was the sight of the queen sitting at that small table within that candlelight

She's just a girl .

On second look he revised his impression a little but not much. She was probably sixteen, maybe seventeen. Marriageable age, especially by royal standards. She had long dark hair bound into one braid that ran down her back. She looked small and alone sitting in the pool of candlelight as her pen scratched on the parchment in front of her

Is she crying?

Her eyes were red but that just could have been the result of writing in weak light, since the candles were barely augmented by the weak moonlight coming in the window. Every now and then she would use a kerchief to dab at her eyes. Jayn stared at her perhaps a bit more openly than he should have, but all her attention was on the parchment in front of her. She paused, apparently thinking of what to write next, then turned back to her work.

Jayn watched her with a mixture of fascination and discomfort. He had never been so close to royalty before and certainly not a queen in her own chamber. Forget being a thief, *anyone* caught in a queen's chambers who didn't belong there could count on their head being the part of their bodies that would be chopped off *last*. Jayn knew this and yet he couldn't stop staring.

He frowned. *Here, in the depths of leisure and luxury. What bloody right does she have to be unhappy?*

In a moment the answer came to him.

THE SAME RIGHT AS ANYONE. IT'S NOT ALWAYS SOMETHING YOU EARN.

Jayn wondered, perhaps, if that thought had really been his own. He decided that it was. After all, it was true enough, even though there certainly were people who deserved unhappiness and more. In his darkest hours, he sometimes thought that, perhaps, he was one of them. He shook his head slightly, and the curtains fluttered. Fortunately the queen took no notice.

Do your job and get out, Fool. The problems of one silly girl-queen are not yours.

He kept still, and waited. After what might have been a few minutes or perhaps longer, the queen seemed satisfied with what she had written. She rolled up the parchment and used one of the candles to drip wax for the seal.

"Lyassa, come here."

The queen only had to repeat the call once before a middle-aged woman emerged from one of the side rooms that had been marked "Lady in Waiting" on Timon's map. Her eyelids drooped and she carried a small candle of her own. "Yes, Majesty."

"I'm ready to retire. I've left a scroll on my writing table. In case I don't rise early enough in the morning I want you to see that it gets to my post rider .. and no one else. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Majesty. I'll take it now for safe —"

"No!" The queen stopped, then continued in a calmer voice. "No, that's all right. I might . . I might change my mind. If the scroll is still on my table in the morning, please do as I instructed."

"Yes, Majesty . would you care for a cup before you retire? There's still some brandy wine left."

"I'm surprised," the queen said, but then smiled faintly. "Yes, Lyassa. Thank you."

The woman disappeared back into her room for a moment and returned with a small goblet, which the queen drained at one gulp. She made a face and coughed, slightly. "There's the end of it, and that's probably best. Good night, Lyassa."

"Sleep well, Majesty."

The servant woman curtseyed and withdrew. The queen went into the nursery for a while, apparently to reassure herself that the child was well, then returned and snuffed out the candles. Jayn kept still and let his eyes adjust once more to the darkness as the queen removed her outer robe and crawled wearily into her overstuffed bed. Quickly her breathing evened out and Jayn heard a faint snore. Too quickly, in Jayn's opinion. Clearly some small crisis was in play, the change of plans hinted at this. Had the queen's servant placed something in her drink, perhaps to help her sleep?

If so, all the better.

Jayn waited a little longer, then slipped into the room. He glanced at the queen in her bed, and then at the door to the servant's room, then started across the chamber. When he got to the table, he hesitated.

Something to prove I was here. That was the bargain.

The seal was the obvious choice, but a little too obvious. The Queen of Wylandia's personal seal would be proof to anyone, but only if he were too, enough to let it be known he had such a thing. Then it might be worth more than his life. No, something else. Something less likely to be missed. Like, perhaps, the letter? If the letter was no longer there in the morning, then the servant would assume the queen had changed her mind. If he was right about what had been in that goblet, then the queen would not wake early, and find the letter gone as she had instructed. And if the letter never arrived ... well, that wasn't such an uncommon thing.

A private letter from the Queen of Wylandia, bearing the impression of her seal?

Perfect but also risky, since he didn't even know what was in the letter. Yet, Jayn realized, that was part of the appeal. He wanted to know what was in that letter. Who it was for. What it said. Moreover, he wanted to know why such a person could be so unhappy. It was there in her face, in her bearing. It was also none of his concern, as he had told himself more than once. And yet, he still wanted to know.

Jayn hesitated, then left the scroll where it was. After that it was the work of but a moment to slip into the nursery and leave the package by the royal crib. He hesitated at the nursery door on the way back, and that was the only thing that saved him.

Someone else was in the queen's chamber.

Lyassa crept across the floor and, glancing several times at the bed to make sure her mistress was still sleeping, she took the letter.

So that was the real reason you slipped your mistress that draught. Not giving the poor girl a chance to change her mind, are we? Who do you really plan to deliver that letter to?

Lyassa left the chamber immediately and returned to her own room. The way was clear now for Jayn to slip out through the garderobe with none the wiser, and he knew that was exactly what he should do.

Jayn turned to the sleeping girl. *You're in a sorry pass, Majesty, when a thief like me serves you better than your own.*

Jayn waited as long as he dared, then crept into the servant's room with all the stealth and skill he could muster and stole the letter back.

Timon, as promised, was waiting for him in the dark cavern beneath the castle. "Is it done?"

Jayn sighed. "Do I die if I say it is?"

"That's answer enough. Jayn, you and I both know there's nothing I can swear that you'll believe, so let me simply say this. If you try anything foolish, you will certainly die. It's more or less the same choice you've had all along. Here's your gold, by the way. I'm not carrying it for you."

Jayn took the bag, but he remained on guard. "Where are we going?"

"Back to the Serpent's Path, of course. Safely out of Wylandia. That was the deal, remember."

"I remember. But after?"

Timon sighed. "Jayn, for a thief and a rogue you worry too much."

Continued on page 108

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MONTEGARDE

Some like it hot. Some like it cold. Some like it in the pot nine days old. But they never called it Montegarde.

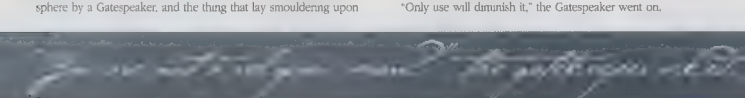
By Liz Williams Illustration by Dave Lee

I had just come from attendance upon the Queen when the summons arrived from Mortegarde. A dark bird brought it, a bird like a raven but with snow white legs and a crimson bill and a bright gaze betokening intelligence. I half expected it to speak, but it only dropped the scroll at my feet before my own front door. There was no doubt that the scroll had been meant for me. It bore my name on the outside—*Dr Gwilliam Anstruther* in large, straggling letters as though written by someone unversed in the practice.

I picked up the scroll and ushered the bird inside. It strode down the hallway as though it were the master of the place, not I, and turned smartly through the door of my consulting chamber. Wondering how it had known where to go, I followed it. The bird watched as I sat down at the desk and unfastened the scroll.

I knew immediately that it had come from another world upon the Tree. Its smell was different—not the dry crackle of our own reed paper, speaking of sun on the marshes, but of iron and fire and ash. It hissed as I unscrolled it, and the words inscribed upon it were written not in indigo or black, but in sharp red letters like wounds. I knew where it came from even before I read the word *Mortegarde*.

Every child knows that there are as many spheres that hang upon the World Tree as there are apples in an orchard in Gildermonth. Some, in both the higher levels toward the stars and the lower reaches of the Great Root, cannot sustain humankind for long. The air of such spheres curdles or boils within the lungs, or splinters against the skin. I have seen a traveler, brought back from a high sphere by a Gatespeaker, and the thing that lay smouldering upon



the shewstone mirror was barely recognizable as a human being, rather a bunch of twisted twigs with a round rim at one end, where a gaping mouth seemed to have consumed its own head. As the College watched, aghast, its tongue sizzled away with a sound like a sigh and the Gatespeaker did not need to add a further warning. Then the civil war had come, bringing more local horrors, and few cared to go exploring elsewhere in such times.

I had wanted to investigate the corpse, but they would not let me. This was only one of many such nuisances, caused by changing times and a new religion that believed in the sanctity of the flesh. How are we to explore the limits of existence if human squeamishness holds us back? How would I have completed my work on the vital spirits of the organism if I had been subject to such spiritual qualms? The flesh is a machine that contains the spirit, nothing more. It is like saying that a kick to the wall of my house damages me. But I digress. It is easy to become obsessed by other people's foolishness.

Of the world of Mortegarde itself, I knew no more than the common run of superstition and legend, brought by explorers upon the Terra Arbor to entertain the credulous and the gullible. Yet perhaps they told us no more than the truth—there were wonders enough upon the Tree after all, and maybe the tales of the iron palaces and the clever-tongued beasts that lived within them were truth indeed.

As I stood staring down at the scroll, the red words shifted and changed until they formed phrases in my own language of Berechamur. *"Come. You are needed."*

There was no signature, only a scored mark in the paper like the touch of a claw. The final unraveling of the scroll proved my undoing. A shining sliver fell out and when, reflexively, I snatched at it, the thing burned its way into my palm. The room filled with the stench of scorched flesh as I doubled up, clutching my hand. The agony ebbed quickly, leaving only soreness and shock in its wake, but when I opened up my palm I found a thick new ridge of bone, marbled with silver. I stared at it in horror and fascination. It was an arboreal key.

I knew I would need a Gatespeaker to travel safely, otherwise the key might simply snatch me up the Tree with no regard for my well-being en route. I therefore made arrangements for the following morning, and spent much of the night studying this addition to my hand. If only one could invent an engine to look within the flesh, unlock the mysteries of bone and sinew without the messy recourse to the dissecting table... I longed to look inside my hand, see what was happening there, how the key had melded itself to the bones and the skin. At last, frustrated, I took myself off to bed.

"You have little choice," the Gatespeaker said. Her scarred lips mangled the words, making her hard to comprehend. Gently, she turned my hand between her own so that the striations within the key flashed in the late light. We were sitting in my study, the windows fastened against the winter cold. "If you do not use the key, it will begin to seek a gate of its own accord. It will grow inward, infesting your flesh, devouring you from within."

"How interesting!" But, I had to concur, almost certainly fatal.

"An irony, that."

"What do you mean?"

The Gatespeaker smiled. "Only that the man they call 'Scalpel' Anstruther," for his enthusiasm for the methods of dissection, "is now in danger of dissection himself, from within."

"I'm aware of my nickname," I said, stiffly. "Medical humor, nothing more. Now, about this key."

"Only use will diminish it," the Gatespeaker went on.

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"And it will take me to Mortegarde?"

"Probably."

I stared at her. "Only 'probably'?"

"It came from Mortegarde and thus is likely to return there. But these things are never wholly certain. The weather of the World Tree is strange and filled with vagaries, and your passage can be affected by it. But as I have said, you have little choice."

"So what should I do?" I asked her reluctantly. I did not like the idea of Gate travel, through the notion of exploring the Tree possessed, I must admit, a certain eldritch appeal.

"You must take this to a Gate, to which I will speak, and then you will travel through."

"There is said to be a Gate near here, in Badelem. Is that true?"

"In the old Basilica." The Gatespeaker paused and her long, sad face grew sadder yet.

"An evil place," I said. "The place where the war started."

"You are not a religious man?" the gatespeaker asked, mildly.

"Of course not. I am a scientist. I believe in what I can experience and see. And besides, who could be, after the ruin that they have brought us to? The Basilica is an unholy place."

The Gatespeaker sighed. "Plenty still follow the path, as I'm sure you know. And gates do not choose. There are portals and rifts everywhere, opening and closing like the wounds of the world. Perhaps there is even one in this room—but stable Gates are rare and it is better to travel thus. I will accompany you to the gate and speak the prayers to the Tree for your safe passage. We can do no more."

I looked down at my own changed hand. Tomorrow, I thought with mingled apprehension and excitement, I could be in Mortegarde.

When the time came, I hastened through the streets. Many were

still half-ruined, damaged by mortar fire and shot, and I cursed the superstitions that had brought us to such a pass and interrupted my work. I went up the rain-wet steps and through the bloodwood doors of the Basilica. The wind slammed them shut behind me as thunder peeled out across Badelem. The Gatespeaker was waiting for me, standing in a shaft of lamplight like a flame in the dark. When she saw me she turned away without speaking, scarlet skirts hissing over the stone flags, but not before I had seen the great thorn that pierced her lips, fastening them shut – a thorn from the World Tree itself, or so it was said.

She beckoned me up a set of spiral stairs that led into the dome of the Basilica, a shattered shell ever since a firebolt from the conflict had broken it like an egg. The Council of Badelem had not had the money to repair it, but the branched candelabras, the delicate leaves that hung from the painted ceiling, and the great gilded column of the trunk that rose from floor to ceiling remained intact. Potential footers were too afraid of the gate, it seemed, of where it led, and of what might come through it. I followed the Gatespeaker along the narrow walkway of a golden branch until we stood close to the trunk itself. I felt a cold, wet drop slide down my cheek and looked up to see a rift in the dome, a cloud-race of sky. The Gatespeaker turned her mute face to me, eyes lost in wells of pain and shadow, and pointed to a slit in the gilt bark. I knew that this was only a representation of the World Tree itself, microcosm reflecting macrocosm, but as I stepped hesitantly closer to the trunk, a dark glitter fractured from deep within the rift and I grew cold and dizzy, as though I stood on the very edge of the Tree and the drop into the Maw.

The Gatespeaker tore the thorn from her lips and spoke a single, terrible word through welling blood. "Now."

She had gone through such pain for me that I hesitated no longer. Behind me, I heard her freed voice crying out the runic prayers in the oldest tongue of Badelem and I slammed my altered hand against the rift.

Immediately, I was snatched up into a storm. Clouds, lightning, the marbled moon were ripped away and I fell upward into the World Tree. I saw its branches crimson in the light of a circlet of suns, the pulsing veins whirling below me in the unfolding landscape of a leaf, as the howl of the World Tree's weather caught me up and tore me through to Mortegarde.

Hard to speak of first impressions, the glimpses gained through the black mist of midnight and the red fog of dawn as I traveled from the Gate. The conjuration of the key brought me out onto the top of a pillar of iron, some miles from the city that I was to come to know as Anrush. Tiny pellets of metal rolled across the surface, making my steps perilous. Beyond, a storm was raging, the wind whupping my hair from its binding and half blinding me. The ground tilted far below, making me dizzy, but I still tried to explore my new surroundings.

Moments later, I fell over a large metal cage. A voice like a bell spoke into my ear. "Get in." I looked around, but no one was visible. Climbing into the cage, however, was preferable to trying to remain upright, and as soon as I did so the cage lifted up from the surface of the pillar and bowled over the edge. It was almost as bad as the journey up the World Tree, yet an intriguing experience all the same. My yell was lost in the wind, sucked so thoroughly from my throat that I thought I might never speak again. Then I was dangling a few feet from the ground. A carriage—a round thing of metal slats interspersed with scaled leather—was waiting on a path of glossy, black earth. Two great beasts with hunched shoulders waited between the shafts. One of them swung its head around as I hastened toward the carriage. I caught sight of black, coiled horns like polished glass, an immense yellow eye. Then I stepped into the carriage. Soft darkness fell around me, and the smell of fire. I sank into a seat, panting, and felt the carriage stir into movement beneath me.

"How was your journey?"—a small whispering voice. It was female.

"Well enough," I tried to say, but the words would not come. I tried again and this time spoke.

"I am Shirre," the small voice said.

"I should like to see you," I ventured, and an obliging light flared up. I found myself gazing into a narrow, shining face. She was beautiful, a classically delineated profile, curved lips, her hair as dark red as a smoldering fire, the eyes concealed behind lenses of jet. Her breasts were bare, and slightly scaled. Then the resemblance to a woman was lost in a coil of snake tail and two long, gloved hands, on which she balanced on the edges of the seat.

"You are a siren," I breathed. Her lips twitched.

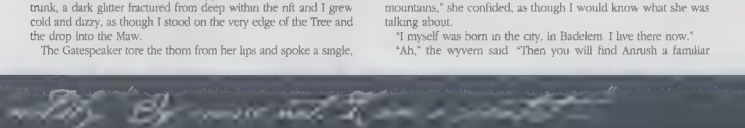
"Why, how kind. But in fact, my heritage is all wyvern, truly of Anrush and Mortegarde. And I am a physician, like yourself."

I nearly exclaimed, "But you are female!" but held my tongue in time. Many things would be different here, to say the least of it. I must not fear new things.

"I have worked in the College of Chirugeons for seven years now, ever since I completed my schooling. I come from the mountains," she confided, as though I would know what she was talking about.

"I myself was born in the city, in Badelem. I live there now."

"Ah," the wyvern said. "Then you will find Anrush a familiar



place."

Is it possible to release the blinds? I should like to see where we are."

She snapped the blinds of the carriage open. "Then see. We are entering it now."

I looked out upon a massive gate, arising from blood-red earth. The metal of which it was made was bright with heat, seeming to boil and bubble in unceasing configuration. It looked nothing like any gate on my world. I felt the heat as the carriage passed through, reaching out to sear my face like a hissing kiss. Then we were through into a street of black iron mansions. Steam rose from vents in the paving and I could see the glow of fires deep within windows. There was no sign of any vegetation. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck.

"We have prepared a special place for you," Shirre said. "It is a room packed with a particular kind of icy stone, brought down from the high crags. I think it will be more to your liking." She leaned forward anxiously as she spoke, clearly eager for me to feel at home.

"I'm sure that I shall appreciate it greatly," I said, though at the moment the choice seemed to be between boiling or freezing. "Tell me, Madame Shirre. Why have you brought me here?"

"Why, to address our College," the wyvern said. "News of your expertise has reached us, tales told down the branches of the Tree. It is our College's understanding that you have many revolutionary new theories—about the blood, for instance."

"Indeed," I said. In a moment, the heat and discomfort were forgotten in that other heat, the glow of science and knowledge. I began to expound upon my latest theory: that the blood is not, as commonly supposed, infected by the element of fire but contains many small particulates akin to benevolent spirits, which guide the

body and converse with one another, carrying messages to the vital organs of consciousness such as the liver, and which are cooled by the influence of the brain. Some of these particulates, I believe, perform a military function and attack malign influences that infect the body through the weakness of the will.

I have seldom had such a receptive audience—not only was there the dreaful religious issue, which silenced my work until recent years, but the more staid and elderly members of my own Institute were prone to scoff—and my recounting took us all the way to the doors of a mansion which, so Shirre informed me, was the home of her own College.

The chamber which I had been allotted was at the back of the mansion. I was taken to it through a labyrinth of passages, but as I stepped from the carriage a second wyvern, a small, twisted, dark thing with the unmistakably subservient demeanor of slave or servant, hastened up to me with a pair of clogs made out of some unknown substance and a woven coat.

"These will protect you from the worst of the heat in the house," Shirre assured me. "Do not touch the walls with your bare flesh on the way to the chamber. We ourselves are used to the heat," she added, apologetically.

The clogs were too big, obliging me to proceed in a kind of slow shuffle. I hoped I would not have to go anywhere in a hurry during my stay. And it was a relief finally to reach the stone-ice room. The room had a single window, that looked out onto a racing torrent and a high arched bridge. A haunch of charred meat and a jug of water stood on a table, and Shirre insisted that it was safe for me to eat and drink. I could not tell where the meat originated, it was fibrous and curiously textured, but flavorsome enough.

When she had gone, I spent some time staring out of the window at the torrent below, illuminated by lamps that formed hazy pools of light in the water-glow, and then I lay down on the hard couch and slept. It did not seem long before the red day dawned.

When I next awoke, Shirre was by the side of the bed, anxiously balancing on a long curl of tail. For a moment, I thought I was still in the middle of a nightmare.

"Please, take time to collect yourself," Shirre said. "In the early afternoon, you are requested to defend your theories before the College."

"Defend?"

Her beautiful mouth smiled. "I meant, of course, 'deliver.' My facility with your language is not so great, sometimes."

There was water for washing, and it did not take me long to prepare. I wrenched the window open and let in a blast of heat that I immediately regretted. Hauling it shut again, I stared out at the crimson sky. Perhaps this would be the sum of it, and then I could go home. But the scientist in me approved. I felt like a bee, soaring through the branches of the World Tree to pollinate Mortegarde with knowledge. And thus I donned my clogs and followed Shirre to the Debating Chamber with enthusiasm.

It was filled with wyverns. Most of them were male with grave, beautiful countenances. Some had silvered scales, and I wondered whether this was a sign of age. Shirre fluttered to the podium, moving with quick, sinuous movements of her lower tail. She looked top-heavy, and it seemed impossible that she could balance or move, but she did. Wyvern anatomy was beginning to fascinate me.

The audience was very still as I delivered my theories, listening attentively with none of the restless fidgeting that I had come to expect from my own Institute. Their eyes were green and golden, like lamps, and they seemed not to blink, but only gazed. I took them through the precepts of my theory of the blood, explaining the issue of animating particulates, and spent some time in dissassembly of the notion of fire as an aspect of this most vital fluid.

At the end of the talk, I asked whether there were any questions. A great silver wyvern in the front row raised a hand, balancing perilously, or so it seemed to me, upon a single palm.

"What do you know, Doctor, of the beliefs of Mortegarde?"

"I fear I know very little."

"Then you do not know of our myth of origin, which tells of how Aissh the First went to the great volcano of Kharth, and in sacrificing himself for his people was reborn with the unspurning principle of fire within his blood?"

"I did not know that tale," I said. "But I am most interested to hear of it." Best to be polite.

"It is no tale!" the wyvern thundered. His voice filled the chamber, resounding with echoes. "It is the truth of all that we are. We are the people of fire and flame, and to claim otherwise is arrant heresy!"

One of the old guard, then. I shifted uneasily upon the podium. A second wyvern, sitting some distance away, interrupted smoothly. "Gheiss, you cannot expect someone from another world to be aware of our beliefs. Doctor, now that you have heard this tale, might I ask whether you would consider it as a possibility for the basis of scientific practice?"

Courtesy urged me to answer yes, but then I thought of Badelem, of my city so recently shattered by religious ideology and faction, superstition that had nearly caused the downfall of our civilization. I could not, in all integrity, tell him that I believed in this myth of origin.

"No," I said. "I cannot. The scientific method must proceed by exploration and examination, not by fable. I fear that I regard all essences of spirit to have a physical explanation."

I feared an outcry, but they were silent. After a moment, the second wyvern said, "Most interesting. I'm sure we would all like to thank Doctor Anstruther for his fascinating new perspective."

This sounded smooth and reasonable enough, but the outburst had agitated me. I had not, I thought, come all the way along the World Tree to experience more of the same treatment that I had formerly received at home. I was relieved to see that there was none of the usual kind of socializing that follows these lectures. Instead the wyvern physicians all filed out in silence and Shirre showed me back to my chamber.

"I hope I did not offend anyone," I said.

"Not at all. Some people are a little more—outspoken—about their beliefs than others."

"Well, I have encountered the same thing, but I should not have liked to have given offense."

"Doctor Anstruther—your theories. How did you come about them?"

"Why, by experiment."

"On living things?"

"Very rarely. Most of my work was carried out upon dead matter, of many varying kinds. Some was human—this is permitted in my own world—" only a small lie here "—but much of it was animal." I paused. "Might I ask whether I am to give any other talks while I am here?"

Shirre appeared momentarily flustered. "I do not know. I believe so, but I must check with the College."

"Of course," I said. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to bring me some material on the beliefs of your people, if it can be translated?"

"I will bring you a speaking scroll, of course," Shirre said. She appeared relieved, doubtless because I could clearly amuse myself and she would not have to spend time entertaining me. I wondered about her life. Was she wed, did she have small wyverns of her own? Or were these folks lives so utterly removed from my own?

Later, she brought me the scroll and I read through the myths of origin. As I had suspected, they were nothing more than superstition, and possibly allegorical. They reminded me of the fables of the Last and First Hours, which had brought such ruin to my own city, and after a while I threw them across the couch in disgust and went to look out of the window at the Mortegarde night instead. I did not sleep well.

In the morning, Shirre once more came to me and explained that later that day, I was to address a much wider audience

"The College feels that their presence alone is a little narrow," she told me. "They would like you to put your views to a more extensive section of society—indeed, to the aristocracy itself."

"I'm flattered," I told her. "And it's good to see the upper echelons taking such an interest in science." But I was not sure that I believed her. My own recent experience had led me to mistrust people's ability to prefer reason and experience to their own blind faith, and I was beginning to feel that Mortegarde might not be as strange as it appeared in this respect.

I was, however, keen to see more of Anrush and as we rumbled along I peered through the windows of the carriage with intense interest. More iron mansions, and here there were gardens between them that seemed composed of mere spikes and spines of trees, as scaled as the beasts that pulled the carriage. But soon the view was blotted out by a fall of hot hail and Shirre pulled the blinds closed once more. A harsh, sere land, this world. I could see why there was such an emphasis on fire and flame.

At length, we reached the place where I was to deliver my lecture. It turned out to be a large hall, with seats arranged in circular rows around a deep central pit, an amphitheater, in short. The theater was filled with wyverns and I could see that these were not the common run of people, but encrusted with jewels and gems, their scales burnished to a dragon's shine. There seemed to be different varieties: some were as green as the ocean, others were the mottled scarlet and black of salamanders. I observed them with interest, and their eyes were all affixed on me.

Once more, I delivered my lecture. And the same thing happened again. This time, an elderly female wyvern, whose eyes were filmed with the bloom of cataract, rose on her tail and asked me whether I had had time to study the myth of origin. Uneasily, I replied

"Yes. I consider it a most meaningful metaphor."

"But do you think it to be true?" the wyvern persisted. I thought for a long, hard moment. A lie might get me out of a difficult situation, and yet—ruined Badelem rose before my inner sight.

"I'm afraid that I do not."

There was a pause. My words seemed to hang in the chamber, echoing. And I realized that I had made a dreadful mistake, but one that I could not regret.

"Then we shall prove it to you," the wyvern said. Suddenly, two of them were on either side of me: huge gray presences, with blades.

"No!" I cried. "Wait, I—"

One of them whipped out a tail and brought me crashing to the floor. I lay there, dazed, and when they lay their long, clawed hands on me I started to struggle, but it was too late. They picked me up and I felt something very cold enter my arm, the coldest thing I had sensed since coming to Mortegarde.

I awoke strapped to a table, naked beneath a sheet. Shirre was perched on its edge, with a dissecting scalpel in her hand. Beyond her, I saw a sea of faces, eyes glowing, anticipatory.

"... necessary to drain the entire body of blood," she was saying, "in order to observe the inflammatory effects. The drained blood will undergo full elemental testing, to prove that the living flame is contained in all beings, and that the inspinting principle of the Tree emanates from Mortegarde itself." There was a light in her reptilian eyes that I had not seen in her before, but which I recognized immediately. It was the derangement of faith. I had seen it plenty of times myself, in Badelem.

"Wait," I tried to say again, but they had gagged me. I endeavored to move my legs, but could not. I tensed my fists and found an unfamiliar sharpness: the key.

The hand in which the key had become embedded was on the opposite side to Shirre, and her long, smooth back was turned. Very slowly, so that she could not see any movement beneath the sheet, I began to saw at the binding with the edge of the key. I did not know how I would get out of the dissecting hall, naked and unarmed as I was, before a host of wyverns. I could not even walk on the hot floor in my own shoes. But if I could not convince them of their errors, I was at least determined not to die without putting up some kind of fight. I sawed at the binding, covert and frantic, as Shirre talked on. She betrayed a depth of fanaticism that she had never revealed to me, but then, she was not human and I did not understand her. When she turned back to me, my hand was almost free.

"The first cut should ably demonstrate my earlier points," she said. I wrenched my hand free of the binding, but it was too late. The scalpel came down, drawing a long incision in my flesh.

The pain was blazing and intense. I cried out, jerking my free hand up, and clapped it to my abdomen. I had forgotten about the key. I felt it penetrate my flesh, screaming down through nerve and fat and jarring on bone.

And the key worked.

I was traveling inward, down through my own body. I saw the red walls of my own self as I turned inside out, glimpsing the slow pulse of organs and the white shelves of bone, the beat of arteries and the long branched tree of my own spine. Microcosm and macrocosm, I thought through the pain. I was like the Tree itself, journeying through the body that reflects the world.

We do not need Gates, I know that now. We can travel the Tree whenever we choose, as long as we are prepared to pay its bloody price. But knowledge has always had a high cost, as the Gatespeaker herself might say, through her scarred lips. I did not see the Tree as I fell, only my own interior, and I came out, injured but whole, in my own study chamber before a congregation of startled students. I wept to see them, and am not ashamed to admit it.

It took me a week to recover. When the stitches were removed, and the brood-maggots they had placed in my wound had done their work, I was deemed strong enough to be told that I had not returned from Mortegarde alone. The wyvern Shirre, sensing my escape, had coiled around me as I vanished into my own flesh, but instead of preventing my flight, she had returned with me. The cold of Badelem had stunned her, but the Institute had made a thorough investigation of her and was continuing to do so.

They asked me to undertake the dissection. I thought of all that she had done to me, all that she was, the light of blind and superstitious faith that had blazed from her inhuman eyes as she stood over me on the dissecting table. I agreed to the dissection.

The procedure was to be undertaken in public for the edification of all. I rejoiced that science was once more in the ascendant, that knowledge again held sway. But as I was preparing for the dissection in the back regions of the surgical amphitheater, preoccupied with such thoughts, I caught sight of myself in a mirror. And I saw to my horror that the light that had blazed behind the wyvern's eyes now lit my own.

I looked at myself for a long time, staring until the light faded and died. And then I walked, very slowly, into the ring of the amphitheater. Shirre lay on the dissection table, her hands and tail strapped securely down. She stared at me defiantly. She knew what to expect, or thought she did. And it was then that I drew the duty surgeons aside and instructed them to let her go.

MONSTERS BENEATH THE ART OF

INTERVIEW BY ARI BERK

Pain. It could feel pain. Pain racked its entire body. And it was good to feel the pain. Good to feel anything other than the end less darkness. It also felt hate. But this wasn't new. It had sat in that doll for over two centuries with hate its only companion. But mostly it felt hunger, a deep ravenous clawing in its stomach. And there were so many sweet smells coming from the little boy's room. So the Plucker waited for the night, waited for the little boy to fall asleep, waited for the toys to come out and play.

—excerpt from Brom's *The Plucker*

Acclaimed painter of the gothic, the gorgeous, and the grotesque, Brom sharpens his quill to bring us a shadowy fairytale of vileness and depravity, love and heroism, suffering and sacrifice in his new illustrated novel *The Plucker*.

★ ***Berk:*** *I understand you have just completed work on an illustrated novel "The Plucker" (for clarification, this is not a graphic novel/comic book, but a lavishly illustrated novel)*

★ **Brom** Yup, 160 pages with over 100 images. *The Plucker* has been an obsession, haunting my days and nights for the last several years. Now, at last, it's finished and on its way to scratch out the eyes of children of all ages.

★ ***Berk:*** *Can you tell us something about the story?*

★ **Brom:** Here's the synopsis: Jack and his Box are stuck beneath the bed with the dust, spiders, and other castaway toys. Forced to face a bitter truth—children grow up and toys are left behind—Jack believes this is the worst that can happen to a toy. But when the Plucker, a malevolent spirit, is set loose upon the world of make believe and Jack is thrust into the unlikely role of defending Thomas, the very child that abandoned him, he finds out there is worse that can befall a toy—far worse. Jack, and a beleaguered last handful of toys, must struggle to rise above their simple roles as playthings in an effort to save the boy they love.

THE BED: BROM AN

THE Plucker

★ ***Berk:*** *And I imagine that abandonment is only the beginning, that there are even worse things than dust bunnies waiting for the "good" toys beneath the bed?*

★ **Brom:** Admittedly, it's tough being a toy in this story. A lot of things are out to eat you. But the story is more than toy carnage. I have always been fascinated with fairytales about toys coming to life. And one of the underlining themes in this book is how toys deal with being abandoned by their children. The last pages in the fina. Winnie the Pooh book, delicately skates around this subject as Christopher Robin heads off to boarding school and Pooh and the gang are left behind. I always wondered what happen to Pooh and the other toys once Christopher left. Is Pooh rotting away in an attic right now? His little soul begging for some child to befriend him? To save him from the rats, spiders, and dry rot?

★ ***Berk:*** *Besides Winnie the Pooh, what else inspired you to begin work on* The Plucker*?*

★ **Brom:** My kids. Reading to them the classics like *The Nutcracker*, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Raggedy Ann*, and other stories where toys are alive in the land of make-believe. It was while reading these that I began to contemplate what would happen if these toys were introduced to a hard dose of reality, and what if something very, very bad entered their happy little world? Could these toys learn to kill to protect themselves? *The Plucker* is essentially a children's fairytale for adults, but unlike most fairytales, there is no guarantee of a happily-ever-after.

★ ***Berk:*** *So it's the monsters-under-the-bed meet Raggedy Ann. Interesting that, despite the sensual maturity of much of your art, it is the primal terrors of childhood that you've chosen for your first illustrated novel. What is it about the monsters under the bed that so fascinate you?*

★ **Brom:** As children we are naturally afraid of the things hiding in the darkness, under the bed, in the closet, the basement, behind the door. Children are much more in tune to both the imaginative and the supernatural, especially to supernatural things that like to bite. As we grow older these senses begin to dull, and we forget... well, some of us forget. I still make sure to leap into the bed to avoid having my toes bit off by the group of nasties hiding beneath my dust-ruffle. So I guess to answer your question, yes, my childhood fears have never completely left me and I find they make fascinating subject matter.

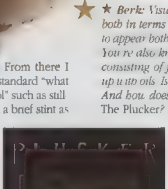
★ ***Berk:*** *Did you draw these horrors when you were a child as well?*

★ **Brom:** As a child, I started out drawing "monsters eating people." My first artbook *Darkwerks* actually has a selection of these

childhood drawings From there I progressed through the standard "what must be drawn in art school" such as still lifes and landscapes. I had a brief stint as a commercial illustrator doing cute products in my early twenties, but that didn't last long Now I'm back to "monsters eating people" and am very happy

★ ***Berk:*** *Where do your monsters in* The Plucker *come from? Are the monsters adapted from folklore or are they created entirely from your own imagination, out of the recollections of your own childhood toy chest? A combination of the two?*

★ **Brom:** The creatures are based on childhood recollections My grandfather's old house had a dank, dirt-walled basement lit by a single light bulb on a string. Heaps of discarded clothing, stacks of canned food, piles of forgotten grimy toys and magazines formed a maze of shadows that a child could quickly get lost in The dirt walls crawled with spiders, centipedes, earwigs, and silverfish. Something—rats, bugs, toads, snakes maybe—had burrowed hundreds of holes into those dirt walls. I knew, *knew*, that horrible things, hungry for my small kid fingers, awaited just out of sight in each of those holes. It was those creatures I tried to recall when creating the Foulthings that populate the world of *The Plucker*



★ ***Berk:*** *Visually, your work has always been very rich and intense both in terms of palette and subject, and has the remarkable ability to appear both very modern and veristically baroque at the same time You're also known for employing a very effective artistic technique consisting of first using acrylic underpainings and then, building up with oils Is this something you learned or developed on your own? And how does this effect lend itself to the illustrations of a book like* The Plucker*?*

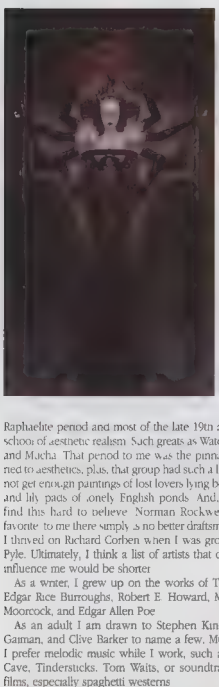
★ **Brom:** Most artists' techniques evolve. In my case I started with a commercial art background where speed was very important to meeting deadlines. So I originally painted in acrylics because they dried very fast But to achieve the buttery softness of the old masters I needed to paint in oils. Oils tend to dry slowly. So my compromise is to start the painting with acrylics, build it up quickly, then finish with a thin coat of oil This allows the rich blended look with a short drying time

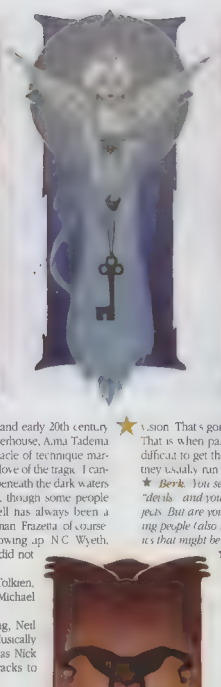
As far as artistic techniques, I am self-taught, so did not have the benefit of learning directly from another artist Most of what I learned came from studying and emulating the work of artists I admired

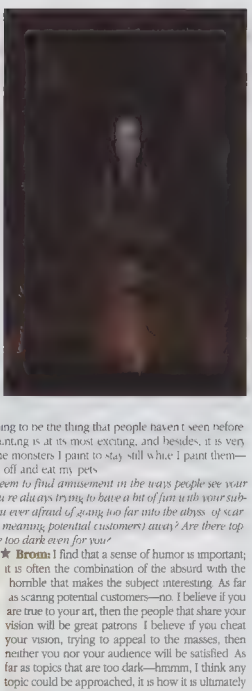
★ ***Berk:*** *As both an artist and a writer, which artists and writers have inspired you?*

★ **Brom:** As a creator, I draw my influence from everything around me To me, that is what an artist in any field does takes in the world around him, mixes it with his own perceptions (in my case, my very warped perceptions), and creates a unique perspective of the world

As an illustrator, all it takes is a walk through any good art museum and my blood turns into paint. I love the artists from the Pre-







Raphaelite period and most of the late 19th and early 20th century schools of aesthetic realism. Such greats as Waterhouse, Alma Tadema and Mucha. That period to me was the pinnacle of technique married to aesthetics, plus, that group had such a love of the tragic. I cannot get enough paintings of lost lovers lying beneath the dark waters and lily pads of lonely English ponds. And, though some people find this hard to believe, Norman Rockwell has always been a favorite to me there simply is no better draftsman. Frazetta, of course. I thrived on Richard Corben when I was growing up. N.C. Wyeth, Pyle. Ultimately, I think a list of artists that did not influence me would be shorter.

As a writer, I grew up on the works of Tolkien, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert E. Howard, Michael Moorcock, and Edgar Allen Poe.

As an adult I am drawn to Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, and Clive Barker to name a few. Musically I prefer melodic music while I work, such as Nick Cave, Tindersticks, Tom Waits, or soundtracks to films, especially spaghetti westerns.

★ ***Berk:*** *And what is your process in bringing your paintings to life, in following their development from concept to finished canvas? Do you use models? Begin with sketches? How long does it take to go from idea to final product?*

★ **Brom:** I start with some quick sketches to establish the composition and elements. From there I will often work out a tight sketch, and sometimes a color comp as well. If the pose is especially challenging I will shoot a model. Though I try to use photos as little as possible, preferring to bring things to life from imagination. The whole process including sketches and such runs about two weeks.

★ ***Berk:*** *Do you work from "live" models or photographic reference?*

★ **Brom:** I prefer dead models, they're better at staying still, but I have been known to use the occasional live model. I try to paint from imagination as much as possible. To me, when I can bring something to life from my mind, that's going to be the most unique vision. That's going to be the thing that people haven't seen before. That is when painting is at its most exciting, and besides, it is very difficult to get the monsters I paint to stay still while I paint them—they usually run off and eat my pets.

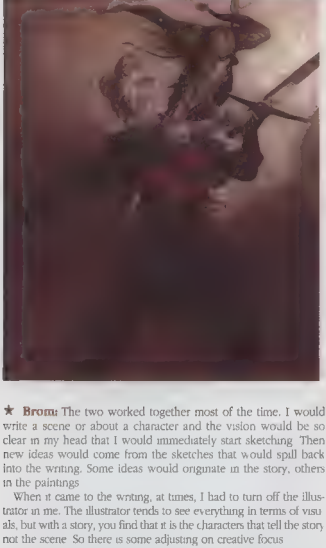
★ ***Berk:*** *You seem to find amusement in the ways people see your "devils" and you're always trying to have a bit of fun with your subjects. But are you ever afraid of going too far into the abyss of scaring people (also meaning potential customers) away? Are there topics that might be too dark even for you?*

★ **Brom:** I find that a sense of humor is important; it is often the combination of the absurd with the horrible that makes the subject interesting. As far as scaring potential customers—no. I believe if you are true to your art, then the people that share your vision will be great patrons. I believe if you cheat your vision, trying to appeal to the masses, then neither you nor your audience will be satisfied. As far as topics that are too dark—hmmm, I think any topic could be approached, it is how it is ultimately handled that I would begin to draw lines.

★ ***Berk:*** *Your prior work is steeped in fantasy, the mythic, sword and sorcery, and science fiction, and while* The Plucker *certainly contains elements of the fantastic and the terrible, it's also a book about childhood. Do you see this book as a departure, of sorts, from your usual genres?*

★ **Brom:** As an artist I am drawn to exploring different paths. But overall my work falls under the darker sides of genres. It is simply what I am interested in. If you asked me to paint a toaster I would find it very boring, but if you asked me to paint an evil toaster, well... see, it suddenly becomes interesting.

★ ***Berk:*** *And what was your process in creating art for* The Plucker, *of following its development from concept to finished art at the same time you were trying to write the book? In writing* The Plucker, *how were the acts of writing and painting similar or dissimilar? Did one ever help, inspire, or hinder the other?*



All images taken from the illustrated novel *The Plucker*.

★ **Brom:** The two worked together most of the time. I would write a scene or about a character and the vision would be so clear in my head that I would immediately start sketching. Then new ideas would come from the sketches that would spill back into the writing. Some ideas would originate in the story, others in the paintings.

When it came to the writing, at times, I had to turn off the illustrator in me. The illustrator tends to see everything in terms of visuals, but with a story, you find that it is the characters that tell the story, not the scene. So there is some adjusting on creative focus.

At times it was truly like two separate people working together.

★ ***Berk:*** *Was the switch in media challenging? Do you have any preference between being an artist or being a writer?*

★ **Brom:** I love both media dearly. But the writer and artist in me do not always get along. Many times in my illustration career I have been at odds with the editorial component of a project, perplexed that they did not see the obvious advantage to changing a description to make a better painting. Now it is funny to find myself on both sides of that argument. Who wins? It varies, as I stated above, usually the two feed off of each other; the elements discovered in one medium are incorporated into the other, enhancing both. This is a large part of the excitement for me.

★ ***Berk:*** *Did you face any challenges bringing such an "untraditional" book to print?*

★ **Brom:** The biggest hurdle was trying to convince marketing folks that illustrated books are not just for children. There seems to be a preconceived notion amongst marketing circles that books with illustrations and animated movies are only for kids. I believe they are overlooking a huge audience of adults that have a deep appreciation for sophisticated stories and finely crafted images. Fortunately, Abrams Books (the publisher) seemed to understand what I was trying to do with *The Plucker* right from the start, and instead of asking me to tone down the material for juvenile consumption, they encouraged me to write the book I wanted.

★ ***Berk:*** *Since it's already such a visual story, would you ever consider adapting* Plucker *for the screen, or would you be concerned that something of the book would be lost in trying to adapt it for film?*

★ **Brom:** I've always considered myself a storyteller, whether through pictures or words. The combination of the two seemed a natural progression –the ultimate way to tell a story in the print medium. Since the story is already visually dynamic, moving into the cinematic realm seems just as natural.

★ ***Berk:*** *And next? Is there anything that you can talk about that's in the works now?*

★ **Brom:** Well, my brain is plumb full of stories, like a sack of wildcats, they all seem to want out at the same time. So I am already working away furiously on the next illustrated novel. At this time I cannot divulge any details, but I will say it is a very, very wicked thing. Basically, my focus is to continue bringing my stories to life through illustrated novels.

★ ***Berk:*** *And when all the tales are told? When all the canvases are covered? How do you want to be remembered your epitaph?*

★ **Brom:** "Oldest living person!"

The Plucker *is an imaginous book, published by Abrams Books and will be available in better book stores and outlets this Fall. The book is 160 pages, full color, over-sized hardbound, with over 100 paintings. You can find more details at www.bromart.com. Brom's powerful and haunting visions can be found in his two art books,* Darkwerks *and* Offerings, *both available from Paper Tiger. Brom is currently kept in a dank cellar somewhere in the drizzly Northwest. There he subsists on poison spiders, centipedes, and bad kung fu flicks. When not eating bugs, he is ever writing, painting, and trying to achieve a happy sing-a-long with the many demons dancing about in his head. If you would like to learn more about Brom's particular brand of devilry,* The Plucker *or future concoctions, go to. www.bromart.com*

a Knot of Toads

It's never easy to understand your parents or your past. But when you can, it's magic.

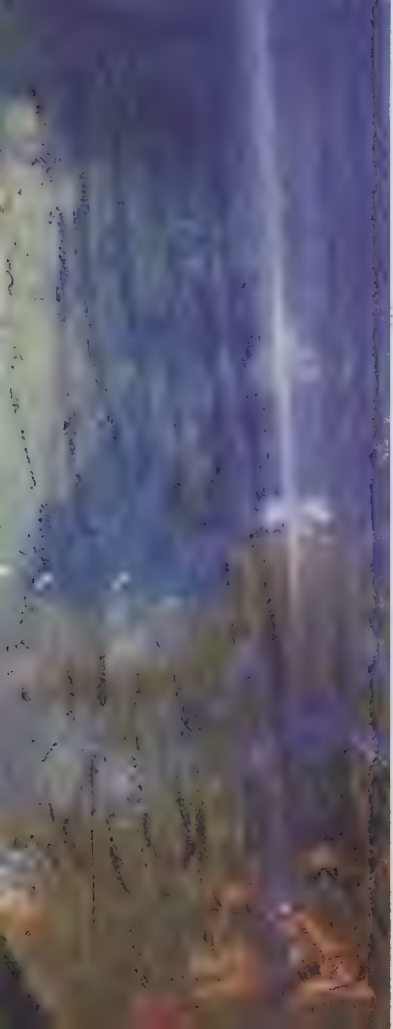
"***March 1921: Late on Saturday night,***" the old man had written, "*a toad came into my study and looked at me with goggled eyes, reflecting my candlelight back at me. It seemed utterly unafraid. Although nothing so far seems linked with this appearance, I have had enough formidable visitants to know this for a harbinger.*"

A harbinger of spring, I would have told him, but I arrived too late to tell him anything. I'd been summoned from my Cambridge rooms to his little white-washed stone house with its red pantile roof overlooking St Monans harbor. The summons had come from his housekeeper, Mrs. Marr, in a frantic early morning phone call. Hers was from the town's one hotel, to me in the porter's room which boasted the only telephone at our college.

It was a miserable ten hours getting there. During the long train ride, though I tried to pray for him, I could not, having given up that sort of thing long before leaving Scotland. Loss of faith, lack of faith—that had been my real reason for going away from home. Taking up a place at Gerton College had only been an excuse.

What I had wanted to do this return was to mend our fences before it was too late to mend anything at all. Father and I had broken so many fences—stones, dykes, stiles, and all—that the mending would have taken more than the fortnight's holiday I had planned for later in the summer. But I'd been summonsed home early this March because, as Mrs. Marr said, father had had a bad turn.

A verrry, bad turn, was what she'd actually said, before the line had gone dead, her r's rattling like a kettle on the boil. In her understated way, she might have meant anything from a twisted ankle to a major heart attack.



The wire that had followed, delivered by a man with a limp and a harelip, had been from my father's doctor, Ewan Kinnear. "Do not delay," it read. Still, there was no diagnosis.

Even so, I did not delay. We'd had no connection in ten years beside a holiday letter exchange. Me to him, not the other way round. But the old man was my only father. I was his only child.

He was dead by the time I got there, and Mrs. Marr stood at the doorway of the house wringing her hands, her black hair caught up in a net. She had not aged a day since I last saw her.

"So you've left it too late, Janet," she cried. "And wearing green I see."

I looked down at my best dress, a soft green linen now badly creased with travel.

She shook her head at me, and only then did I remember. In St. Monans they always said, "After green comes grief."

"I didn't know he was that ill. I came as fast as I could."

But Mrs. Marr's face showed her disdain for my excuse. Her eyes narrowed and she didn't put out her hand. She'd always been on father's side, especially in the matter of my faith. "His old heart's burst in two." She was of the old school in speech as well as faith.

"His heart was stone, Maggie, and well you know it." A widow, she'd waited twenty-seven years, since my mother died birthing me, for the old man to notice her. She must be old herself now.

"Stane can still feel pain," she cried.

"What pain?" I asked.

"Of your leaving."

What good would it have done to point out I'd left more than

BY JANE YOLEN
ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC DINYER

ten years earlier and he'd hardly noticed. He'd had a decade more of calcification, a decade more of pouring over his bloody old books— the Latin texts of apostates and heretics. A decade more of filling notebooks with his crabbed script.

A decade more of ignoring his only child.

My God, I thought, meaning no appeal to a deity but a simple swear, *I am still furious with him. It's no wonder I've never married.* Though I'd had chances. Plenty of them. Well, two that were real enough.

I went into the house, and the smell of candle wax and fish and salt sea were as familiar to me as though I'd never left. But there was another smell, too.

Death

And something more.

It was fear. But I was not to know that till later

The study where evidently he'd died, sitting up in his chair, was a dark place, even when the curtains were drawn back, which had not been frequent in my childhood. Father liked the close, wood-panelled room, made closer by the ever-burning fire. I'd been allowed in there only when being punished, standing just inside the doorway, with my hands clasped behind me, to listen to my sins being counted. My sins were homey ones, like shouting in the hallway, walking too loudly by his door, or refusing to learn my verses from the Bible. I was far too innocent a child for more than that.

Even at five and six and seven I'd been an unbeliever. Not having a mother had made me so. How could I worship a God who, both Mrs. Marr and my father assured me, had so wanted mother, He'd called her away. A selfish God, that, who had listened to his own desires and not mine. Such a God was not for me. Not then. Not now.

I had a sudden urge—me, a lecturer in a prestigious university and who should have known better—to clasp my hands behind me and await my punishment.

But, I thought, the old punisher is dead. And—if he's to be believed—gone to his own punishment. Though I was certain that the only place he had gone was to the upstairs bedroom where he was laid out, awaiting my instructions as to his burial.

I WENT INTO EVERY OTHER ROOM OF THE HOUSE BUT that bedroom, memory like an old fishing line dragging me on. The smells, the dark moody smells, remained the same, though Mrs. Marr had a good wood fire burning in the grate, not peat, a wee change in this changeless place. But everything else was so much smaller than I remembered, my little bedroom at the back of the house the smallest of them all.

To my surprise, nothing in my bedroom had been removed. My bed, my toys—the little wooden doll with jointed arms and legs I called Annie, my ragged copy of "Rhymes and Tunes for Little Folks," the boxed chess set just the size for little hands, my cloth bag filled with buttons—the rag rug, the over-worked sampler on the wall. All were the same. I was surprised to even find one of my old pinafores and black stockings in the wardrobe. I charged Mrs. Marr with more sentiment than sense. It was a shrine to the child that I'd been, not the young woman who had run off. It had to have been Mrs. Marr's idea. Father would never have countenanced false gods.

Staring out of the low window, I looked out toward the sea. A fog sat on the horizon, white and patchy. Below it the sea was a deep, solitary blue. Spring comes early to the East Neuk but summer stays away. I guessed that pussywillows had already appeared around the edges of the lochans, snowdrops and aconite decorating the inland gardens.

Once I'd loved to stare out at that sea, escaping the dark brooding house whenever I could, even in a cutting wind, the kind that could raise bruises.

Once I'd loved to stare out at that sea, escaping the dark brooding house whenever I could, even in a cutting wind, the kind that could raise bruises. Down I'd go to the beach to play amongst the yawls hauled up on the high wooden trestles, ready for tarring. Once I'd dreamed of going off to sea with the fishermen, coming home to the harbor in the late summer light, and seeing the silver scales glinting on the beach. Though of course fishing was not a woman's job. Not then, not now. A woman in a boat was unthinkable even this far into the twentieth century. St. Monans is firmly eighteenth century and likely to remain so forever.

But I'd been sent off to school, away from the father who found me a loud and heretical discomfort. At first it was just a few towns away, to St. Leonard's in St. Andrews, but as I was a boarder—my father's one extravagance—it might as well have been across the country, or the ocean, as far as seeing my father was concerned. And there I'd fallen in love with words in books.

Words—not water, not wind.

In that way I showed myself to be my father's daughter. Only I never said so to him, nor he to me.

MAKING MY WAY BACK DOWN THE STAIRS, I OVERheard several folk in the kitchen. They were speaking of those things St. Monans folk always speak of, no matter their occupations: Fish and weather.

"There's been nae herring in the firth this winter," came a light man's voice. "Nane." Doctor Kinnear.

"It's a bitter wind to keep the men at hame, the fish awa." Mrs. Marr agreed.

Weather and the fishing. Always the same.

But a third voice, one I didn't immediately recognize, a rumbling growl of a voice, added, "Does she know?"

"Do I know what?" I asked, coming into the room where the big black-leaded grate threw out enough heat to warm the entire house. "How. Father died?"

I stared at the last speaker, a stranger I thought, but somehow familiar. He was tall for a St. Monans man, but dressed as one of the fisherfolk, in dark trousers, a heavy white sweater, and thick white sea stockings. And he was sunburnt like them, too, with eyes the exact blue of the April sea, gathered round with laugh lines. A ginger mustache, thick and full, hung down the sides of his mouth like a parenthesis.

"By God, Alec Hughes," I said, startled to have remembered, surprised that I could have forgotten. He grinned.

When we'd been young—very young—Alec and I were inseparable. Never mind that boys and girls never played together in St. Monans. Boys from the Bass, girls from the May, the old folk wisdom went. The Bass Rock, the Isle of May, the original separation of the sexes. Apart at birth and ever after. Yet Alec and I had done everything together: messed about with the boats, played cards, built sand castles, fished with *peins*—shore crabs about to cast their shells—and stolen jam pieces from his mother's kitchen to eat down by one of the gates in the drystone dykes. We'd even often hied off to the low cliff below the ruins of Andross Castle to look for *croupies*, fossils, though whether we ever found any I couldn't recall. When I'd been sent away to school, he'd stayed on in St. Monans, going to Anstruther's Waid Academy in the next town but one, until he was old enough—I presumed—to join the fishing fleet, like his father before him. His father was a stern and dour soul, a Temperance man who used to preach in the open air.

Alec had been the first boy to kiss me, my back against the stone windmill down by the Salt Pans. And until I'd graduated from St. Leonard's, the only boy to do so, though I'd made up for that since.

"I thought, Jan," he said slowly, "that God was not in your vocabulary."

"Except as a swear," I retorted. "Good to see you, too, Alec."

Mrs. Marr's eyebrows both rose considerably, like fulmars over the green-grey sea of her eyes.

Alec laughed, and it was astonishing how that laugh reminded me of the boy who'd stayed behind. "Yes," he said. "Do you know how your father died?"

"Heart attack, so Mrs. Marr told me."

I stared at the three of them. Mrs. Marr was wringing her hands again, an oddly old-fashioned motion at which she seemed well practiced. Dr. Kinnear polished his eyeglasses with a large white piece of cloth, his flyaway eyebrows proclaiming his advancing age. And Alec—had I remembered how blue his eyes were? Alec nibbled on the right end of his mustache.

"Did I say that?" Mrs. Marr asked. "Bless me, I didna."

And indeed, she hadn't. She'd been more poetic.

"*Burst in twa*, you said." I smiled, trying to apologize for misspeaking. Not a good trait in a scholar.

"Indeed. Indeed." Mrs. Marr's wringling hands began again. Any minute I supposed she would break out into a Psalm. I remembered how her one boast was that she'd learned them all by heart as a child and never forgot a one of them.

"A shock, I would have said," Alec said by way of elaborating.

"A fright," the doctor added.

"Really? Is that the medical term?" I asked. "What in St. Monans could my father possibly be frightened of?"

Astonishingly, Mrs. Marr began to wail then, a high, thin keening that went on and on till Alec put his arm around her and marched her over to the stone sink where he splashed her face with cold water and she quieted at once. Then she turned to the blackened kettle squalling on the grate and started to make us all tea.

I turned to the doctor who had his glasses on now, which made him look like a somewhat surprised barn owl. "What do you really mean, Dr. Kinnear?"

"Have you nae seen him yet?" he asked, his head gesturing towards the back stairs.

"I . . .I couldn't," I admitted. But I said no more. How could I tell this man I hardly knew that my father and I were virtual strangers. No—it was more than that. I was afraid of my father dead as I'd never been alive. Because now he knew for certain whether he was right or I was, about God and Heaven and the rest.

"Come," said Dr. Kinnear in a voice that seemed permanently gentle. He held out a hand and led me back up the stairs and down the hall to my father's room. Then he went in with me and stood by my side as I looked down.

My father was laid out on his bed, the Scottish double my mother had died in, the one he'd slept in every night of his adult life except the day she'd given birth, the day she died.

Like the house, he was much smaller than I remembered. His wild, white hair lay untamed around his head in a kind of corolla. The skin of his face was parchment stretched over bone. That great prow of a nose was, in death, strong enough to guide a ship in. Thankfully his eyes were shut. His hands were crossed on his chest. He was dressed in an old dark suit. I remembered it well.

"He doesn't look afraid," I said. Though he didn't look peaceful either. Just dead.

"Once he'd lost the stiffness, I smoothed his face a bit," the doctor told me. "Smoothed it out. Otherwise Mrs. Marr would no have settled."

"Settled?"

He nodded. "She found him at his desk, stone dead. Ran down the road screaming all the way to the pub. And lucky I was there, having a drink with friends. I came up to see yer father sitting up in his chair, with a face so full of fear, I looked around myself to discover the cause of it."

"And did you?"

His blank expression said it all. He simply handed me a pile of five notebooks. "These were on the desk in front of him. Some of the writing is in Latin, which I have but little of. Perhaps ye can read it, being the scholar. Mrs. Marr has said that they should be thrown on the fire, or at least much of them scored out. But I told her that had to be yer decision and Alec agrees."

I took the notebooks, thinking that this was what had stolen my father from me and now was all I had of him. But I said none of that aloud. After glancing over at the old man again, I asked, "May I have a moment with him?" My voice cracked on the final word.

Dr. Kinnear nodded again and left the room.

I went over to the bed and looked down at the silent body. *The old dragon*, I thought, *has no teeth*. Then I heard a sound, something so tiny I scarcely registered it. Turning, I saw a toad by the bedfoot.

"Nothing for you here, puddock," I said, reverting to the old Scots word. Though I'd worked so hard to lose my accent and vocabulary, here in my father's house the old way of speech came flooding back. Shifting the books to one hand, I picked the toad up with the other. Then, I tiptoed out of the door as if my father would have minded the sound of my footsteps now.

Once outside, I set the toad gently in the garden, or the remains of the garden, now so sadly neglected, its vines running rampant across what was once an arbor of white roses and red. I watched as it hopped under some large dock leaves and, quite effectively, disappeared.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON MY FATHER'S BODY WAS taken away by three burly men for its chestening, being placed into its coffin and the lid screwed down. Then it would lie in the cold kirk till the funeral the next day.

Once he was gone from the house, I finally felt I could look in his journals. I might have sat comfortably in the study, but I'd never been welcomed there before, so didn't feel it my place now. The kitchen and sitting room were more Mrs. Marr's place than mine. And if I never had to go back into the old man's bedroom, it would be years too soon for me.

So I lay in my childhood bed, the covers up to my chin, and read by the flickering lamplight. Mrs. Marr, bless her, had brought up a warming pan which she came twice to refill. And she brought up as well a pot of tea and jam pieces and several slabs of good honest cheddar.

"I didna think ye'd want a big supper."

She was right. Food was the last thing on my mind.

After she left the room, I took a silver flask from under my pillow where I'd hidden it first thing, and poured a hefty dram of whisky into the teapot. I would need more than Mrs. Marr's offerings to stay warm this night. Outside the sea moaned as it pushed past the skelhes, on its way to the shore. I'd all but forgotten that sound. It made me smile.

I read the last part of the last journal first, where father talked about the toad, wondering briefly if it was the very same toad I had found at his bedfoot. But it was the bit right after, where he spoke of "formidable visitants" that riveted me. What had he meant? From the tone of it, I didn't think he meant any of the our St. Monans neighbors.

The scholar in me asserted itself, and I turned to the first of the journals, marked 1926, some five years earlier. There was one book for each year. I started with that first notebook and read long into the night.

The journals were not easy to decipher for my father's handwriting was crabbed with age and, I expect, arthritis. The early works were splotchy and, in places, faded. Also he had inserted sketchy pictures and diagrams. Occasionally he'd written whole paragraphs in corrupted Latin, or at least in a dialect unknown to me.

What he seemed engaged upon was a study of a famous trial of local witches in 1590, supervised by King James VI himself. The VI of Scotland, for he was Mary Queen of Scots' own son, and Queen Elizabeth's heir.

The witches, some ninety in all according to my father's notes, had been accused of sailing over the Firth to North Berwick in riddles—sieves, I think he meant—to plot the death of the king by raising a storm when he sailed to Denmark. However, I stumbled so often over my Latin translations, I decided I needed a dictionary. And me a classics scholar.

So halfway through the night, I rose and, taking the lamp, made my way through the cold dark, tiptoeing so as not to wake Mrs. Marr. Nothing was unfamiliar beneath my bare feet. The kitchen stove would not have gone out completely, only filled with gathering coal and kept minimally warm. All those years of my childhood came rushing back. I could have gone into the study without the lamp. I

suppose. But to find the book I needed, I'd have to have light

And lucky indeed I took it, for in its light I saw—gathered on the floor of my father's study—a group of toads throwing strange shadows against the bookshelves. I shuddered to think what might have happened had I stepped barefooted amongst them.

But how had they gotten in? And was the toad I'd taken into the garden amongst them? Then I wondered aloud at what such a gathering should be called. I'd heard of a murder of crows, an exaltation of larks. Perhaps toads came in a congregation? For that is what they looked like, a squat congregation, huddled together, nodding their heads, and waiting on the minister in this most unlikely of kirks.

It was too dark even with the lamp, and far too late, for me to round them up. So I sidestepped them and, after much searching, found the Latin dictionary where it sat cracked open on my father's desk. I grabbed it up, avoided the congregation of toads, and went out the door. When I looked back, I could still see the odd shadows dancing along the walls.

I almost ran back to my bed, shutting the door carefully behind me. I didn't want that dark presbytery coming in, as if they could possibly hop up the stairs like the frog in the old tale, demanding to be taken to my little bed.

But the shock of my father's death and the long day of travel, another healthy swallow of my whisky, as well as that odd huddle of toads, all seemed to combine to put me into a deep sleep. If I dreamed, I didn't remember any of it. I woke to one of those dawn choruses of my childhood, comprised of blackbirds, song thrushes, gulls, rooks, and jackdaws, all arguing over who should wake me first.

FOR A MOMENT I COULDN'T RECALL WHERE I WAS

Eyes closed, I listened to the birds, so different from the softer, more lyrical sounds outside my Cambridge windows. But I woke fully in the knowledge that I was back in my childhood home, that my father was dead and to be buried that afternoon if possible, as I had requested of the doctor and Mrs. Marr, and I had only hours to make things tidy in my mind. Then I would be away from St. Monans and its small-mindedness, back to Cambridge where I truly belonged.

I got out of bed, washed, dressed in the simple black dress I always travel with, a black bandeaux on my fair hair, and went into the kitchen to make myself some tea.

Mrs. Marr was there before me, sitting on a hardback chair and knitting a navy blue guernsey sweater with its complicated patterning. She set the needles down and handed me a full cup, the tea nearly black even with its splash of milk. There was a heaping bowl of porridge, sprinkled generously with salt, plus bread slathered with golden syrup.

"Thank you," I said. It would have done no good to argue that I drank coffee now, nor did I like either oatmeal or treacle, and never ate till noon. Besides, I was suddenly ravenous. "What do you need me to do?" I asked between mouthfuls, stuffing them in the way I'd done as a youngster.

"Tis all arranged," she said, taking up the needles again. No proper St. Monans woman was ever idle long. "Though sooner than is proper. But all to accommodate ye, he'll be in the kirkyard this afternoon. Lucky for ye it's a Sunday, or we couldna do it. The men are home from fishing." She was clearly not pleased with me. "Ye just need to be there at the service. Not that many will come. He was no generous with his company." By which she meant he had few friends. Nor relatives except me.

"Then I'm going to walk down by the water this morning," I told her. "Unless you have something that needs doing. I want to clear my head."

"Aye, ye would."

Was that condemnation or acceptance? Who could tell? Perhaps she meant I was still the thankless child she remembered. Or that I was like my father. Or that she wanted only to see the back of me, sweeping me from her domain so she could clean and bake without my worrying presence. I thanked her again for the meal, but she wanted me gone. As I had been for the past ten years. And I was as eager to be gone, as she was to have me. The funeral was not till mid afternoon.

"There are toads in the study," I said as I started out the door.

"Toads?" She looked startled. Or perhaps frightened.

"Puddocks. A congregation of them."

Her head cocked to one side. "Och, ye mean a knot. A knot of toads."

A knot. Of course. I should have remembered. "Shall I put them out?" At least I could do that for her.

She nodded. "Aye."

I found a paper sack and went into the study, but though I looked around for quite some time, I couldn't find the toads anywhere. If I hadn't still had the Latin dictionary in my bedroom, I would have thought my night visit amongst them and my scare from their shadows had been but a dream.

"All gone," I called to Mrs. Marr before slipping out through the front door and heading toward the strand.

Nowhere in St. Monans is far from the sea. I didn't realize how much the sound of it was in my bones until I moved to Cambridge. Or how much I'd missed that sound till I slept last night in my old room.

I found my way to the foot of the church walls where boats lay upturned, looking like beached dolphins. A few of the older men, past their fishing days, sat with their backs against the salted stone, smoking silently, and staring out to the gray slatey waters of the Firth. Nodding to them, I took off along the beach. Overhead gulls squabbled and far out, near the Bass Rock, I could see gannets diving head-first into the water.

At first I thought I heard the wind sighing my name. Then I looked back at the old kirk on the cliff above me. Someone was waving at me in the ancient kirkyard. It was Alec.

He signaled that he was coming down to walk with me and as I waited, I thought about what a handsome man he'd turned into. *But a fisherman,* I reminded myself, a bit of the old snobbery biting me on the back of the neck. St. Monans, like the other fishing villages of the East Neuk, were made up of three classes—fisher folk, farmers, and the shopkeepers and tradesmen. My father being a scholar was outside of them all, which meant that as his daughter, I belonged to none of them either.

Still, in this place, where I was once so much a girl of the town—from the May—I felt my heart give a small stutter. I remembered that first kiss, so soft and sweet and innocent, the windmill hard against my back. My last serious relationship had been almost a year ago, and I was more than ready to fall in love again. Even at the foot of my father's grave. But not with a fisherman. Not in St. Monans.

Alec found his way down to the sand and came toward me. "Off to find croupies?" he called.

I laughed. "The only fossil I've found recently has been my father," I said, then bit my lower lip at his scowl.

"He was nae a bad man, Jan," he said, catching up to me. "Just undone by his reading."

I turned and glared at him. "Do you think reading an ailment then?"

He put up his hands, palms towards me. "Whoa, lass. I'm a big reader myself. But what the old man had been reading lately had clearly unnerved him. He couldna put it into context. Mrs. Marr said as much before you came. These last few months he'd stayed away from the pub, from the kirk, from everyone who'd known him well. No one kenned what he'd been on about."

I wondered what sort of thing Alec would be reading. *The fishing report? The local paper?* Feeling out of sorts, I said sharply, "Well, I was going over his journals last night and what he's been on about are the old North Berwick witches."

Alec's lips pursed. "The ones who plotted to blow King James off the map." It was a statement, not a question.

"The very ones."

"Not a smart thing for the unprepared to tackle."

I wondered if Alec had become as hag-ridden and superstitious as any St. Monans' fisherman. Ready to turn home from his boat if he met a woman on the way. Or not daring to say "salmon" or "pig" and instead speaking of "red fish" and "curly tail," or shouting out "Cauld iron!" at any mention of them. All the East Neuk tip-leavings I was glad to be shed of.

He took the measure of my disapproving face, and laughed. "Ye take me for a gowk," he said. "But there are more things in heaven and earth, Janet, than are dreamt of in yer philosophy."

I laughed as Shakespeare tumbled from his lips. Alec could always make me laugh. "Pax," I said.

He reached over, took my hand, gave it a squeeze. "Pax." Then he dropped it again as we walked along the beach, a comfortable silence between us.

The tide had just turned and was heading out. Gulls, like satisfied housewives, sat happily in the receding waves. One lone boat was on the horizon and the sky was that wonderful spring blue, without a threatening cloud, not even the fluffy Babylonians, as the fishermen called them.

"Shouldn't you be out there?" I said, pointing at the boat as we passed by the smoky fish-curing sheds.

"I rarely get out there anymore," he answered, not looking at me but at the sea. "Too busy until summer. And why old man Sinclair is fishing when the last of the winter herring have been hauled in, I canna fathom."

I turned toward him. "Too busy with what?"

He laughed. "Och, Janet, yer so caught up in yer own preconceptions, ye canna see what's here before yer eyes."

I didn't answer right away, and the moment stretched between us, as the silence had before. Only this was not comfortable. At last I said, "Are you too busy to help me solve the mystery of my father's death?"

"Solve the mystery of his life first," he told me, "and the mystery of his death will inevitably be revealed." Then he touched his cap, nodded at me, and strolled away.

I was left to ponder what he said. Or what he meant. I certainly wasn't going to chase after him. I was too proud to do that. Instead, I went back to the house, changed my shoes, made myself a plate of bread and cheese. There was no wine in the house. Mrs. Marr was as Temperance as Alec's old father had been. But I found some miserable sherry hidden in my father's study. It smelled like turpentine, so I made do with fresh milk, taking the plate and glass up to my bedroom, to read some more of my father's journals until it was time to bury him.

IT IS NOT TOO BROAD A STATEMENT TO SAY THAT Father was clearly out of his mind. For one, he was obsessed with local witches. For another, he seemed to believe in them. While he spared a few paragraphs for Christian Dote, St. Monans' homegrown witch of 1640s, and a bit more about the various Anstruther, St. Andrews, and Crail trials—listing the hideous tortures, and executions of hundreds of poor old women in his journal entries—it was the earlier North Berwick crew who really seemed to capture his imagination. By the third year's journal, I could see that he obviously considered the North Berwick witchery evil real, whereas the others, a century later, he dismissed as deluded or senile old women, as deluded and senile as the men who hunted them.

Here is what he wrote about the Berwick corps: *"They were a scabrous bunch, these ninety greedy women and six men, wanting no more than what they considered their due: a king and his bride dead in the sea, a kingdom in ruins, themselves set up in high places."*

"Oh, Father," I whispered, "what a noble mind is here o'erthrown." For whatever problems I'd had with him—and they were many—I had always admired his intelligence.

He described the ceremonies they indulged in, and they were awful. In the small North Berwick church, fueled on wine and sex, the witches had begun a ritual to call up a wind that would turn over the royal ship and drown King James. First they'd christened a cat with the name of Hecate, while black candles flickered fitfully along the walls of the apse and nave. Then they tortured the poor creature by passing it back and forth across a flaming hearth. Its elf-knotted hair caught fire and burned slowly, and the little beastie screamed in agony. The smell must have been appalling, but he doesn't mention that. I once caught my hair on fire, bending over a stove on a cold night in Cambridge, and it was the smell that was the worst of it. It lingered in my room for days.

Then I thought of my own dear moggie at home, a sweet orange-colored puss who slept each night at my bedfoot. If anyone ever treated her the way the North Berwick witches had that poor cat, I'd be more than ready to kill. And not with any wind, either.

But there was worse yet, and I shuddered as I continued reading. One of the men, so Father reported, had dug up a corpse from the church cemetery, and with a companion had cut off the dead man's hands and feet. Then the witches attached the severed parts to the cat's paws. After this they attached the corpse's sex organs to the cat's. I could only hope the poor creature was dead by this point. After this desecration, they proceeded to a pier at the nearby village of Leith where they flung the wee beastie into the sea.

After this, they attached the corpse's sex organs to the cat's. I could only hope the poor creature was dead by this point.

Father wrote. *"A storm was summarily raised by this foul method, along with the more traditional knotted twine. The storm blackened the skies, with wild gales churning the sea. The howl of the wind could be heard all the way across the Firth to Fife. But the odious crew had made a deadly miscalculation. The squall caught a ship crossing from Kinghorn to Leith and smashed it to pieces all right, but it was not the king's ship. The magic lasted only long enough to kill a few innocent sailors on that first ship, and then blew itself out to sea. As for the king, he proceeded over calmer waters with his bride, arriving safely in Denmark and thence home again to write that great treatise on witchcraft,* Demonology, *and preside over a number of witch trials thereafter."*

I did not read quickly because, as I have said, parts of the journal were in a strange Latin and for those passages I needed the help of the dictionary. I was like a girl at school with lines to translate by morning, frustrated, achingly close to comprehension, but somehow missing the point. In fact, I did not understand them completely until I read them aloud. And then suddenly, as a roiled liquid settles at last, all became clear. The passages were some sort of incantation, or invitation, to the witches and to the evil they so devoutly and hideously served.

I closed the journal and shook my head. Poor Father. He wrote as if the witchcraft were fact, not a coincidence of gales from the southeast that threw up vast quantities of seaweed on the shore, and the havenings of tortured old women. Put a scold's bridle on me, and I would probably admit to intercourse with the devil. Any devil. And describe him and his nether parts as well.

But Father's words, as wild and unbelievable as they were, held me in a kind of thrall. And I would have remained on my bed reading further if Mrs. Marr hadn't knocked on the door and summonsed me to his funeral.

She looked me over carefully, but for once I seemed to pass muster, my smart black Cambridge dress suitable for the occasion. She handed me a black hat. "I didna think ye'd have thought to bring one." Her lips drew down into a thin, straight line.

Standing before me, her plain black dress covered at the top by a

solemn dark shawl, and on her head an astonishing hat covered with artificial black flowers, she was clearly waiting for me to say something

"Thank you," I said at last. And it was true, bringing a hat along hadn't occurred to me at all. I took off the bandeaux, and set the proffered hat on my head. It was a perfect fit, though made me look fifteen years older, with its masses of black feathers, or so the mirror told me.

Lips pursed, she nodded at me, then turned, saying over her shoulder, "Mary McDougall did for him."

It took me a moment to figure out what she meant. Then I remembered. Though she must be nearer sixty than fifty, Mary McDougall had been both midwife and dresser of the dead when I was a child. So it had been she and not Mrs. Marr who must have washed my father and put him into the clothes he'd be buried in. *So Mrs. Marr missed out on her last great opportunity,* I thought.

"What do I give her?" I asked to Mrs. Marr's ramrod back.

Without turning around again, she said, "We'll give her all yer father's old clothes. She'll be happy enough with that."

"But surely a fee. . ."

She walked out of the door.

It was clear to me then that nothing had changed since I'd left. It was still the nineteenth century. Or maybe the eighteenth. I longed for the burial to be over and done with, my father's meager possessions sorted, the house sold, and me back on a train heading south.

WE WALKED TO THE KIRK IN SILENCE, CROSSING OVER the burn which rushed along beneath the little bridge. St. Monans has always been justifiably proud of its ancient kirk and even in this dreary moment I could remark its beauty. Some of its stonework runs back in an unbroken line to the thirteenth century.

And some of its customs, I told myself without real bitterness.

When we entered the kirk proper, I was surprised to see that Mrs. Marr had been wrong. She'd said not many would come, but the church was overfull with visitants.

We walked down to the front. As the major mourners, we commanded the first pew, Mrs. Marr, the de facto wife, and me, the runaway daughter. There was a murmur when we sat down together, not quite of disapproval, but certainly of interest. Gossip in a town like St. Monans is everybody's business.

Behind us, Alec and Dr. Kinnear were already settled in. And three men sat beside them, men whose faces I recognized, friends of my father's, but grown so old. I turned, nodded at them with, I hope, a smile that thanked them for coming. They didn't smile back.

In the other pews were fishermen and shopkeepers and the few teachers I could put a name to. But behind them was a congregation of strangers who leaned forward with an avidity that one sees only in the faces of vultures at their feed. I knew none of them and wondered if they were newcomers to the town. Or if it was just that I hadn't been home in so long, even those families who'd been here forever were strangers to me now.

Father's pine box was set before the altar and I kept my eyes averted, watching instead an ettercap, a spider, slowly spinning her way from one edge of the pulpit to the other. No one in the town would have removed her, for it was considered bad luck. It kept me from sighing, it kept me from weeping.

The minister went on for nearly half an hour, lauding my father's graces, his intelligence, his dedication. If any of us wondered about whom he was talking, we didn't answer back. But when it was over, and six large fishermen, uneasy in their Sunday clothes, stood to shoulder the coffin, I leaped up with them. Putting my hand on the pine top, I whispered, "I forgive you, Father. Do you forgive me?"

There was an audible gasp from the congregation behind me, though I'd spoken so low, I doubted any of them—not even Alec—could have heard me. I sat down again, shaken and cold.

And then the fishermen took him off to the kirkyard, to a grave so recently and quickly carved out of the cold ground, its edges were jagged. As we stood there, a huge black cloud covered the sun. The tide was dead low and the bones of the sea, those dark grey rock skellies, showed in profusion like the spines of some prehistoric dragons. Off the coast of South Queensferry was a large boat, some kind of yacht, sailing majestically toward a mooring. But it would be evening, I thought, before they could put in safely.

As I held on to Mrs. Marr's arm, she suddenly started shaking so hard, I thought she would shake me off.

How she must have loved my father, I thought, and found myself momentarily jealous.

Then the coffin was lowered, and that stopped her shaking. As the first clods were shoveled into the gaping hole, she turned to me and said, "Well, that's it then."

SO WE WALKED BACK TO THE HOUSE WHERE A HALF dozen people stopped in for a dram or three of whiskey—brought in by Alec despite Mrs. Marr's strong disapproval. "There's a Devil in every mouthful of whiskey," she muttered, setting out the fresh baked shortbread and sultana cakes with a pitcher of lemonade. To mollify her, I drank the lemonade, but I was the only one.

Soon I was taken aside by an old man—Jock was his name—and told that my father had been a great gentleman though late had turned peculiar. Another, bald and wrinkled, drank his whiskey down in a single gulp, before declaring loudly that my father had been "One for the books." He managed to make that sound like an affliction. One woman of a certain age who addressed me as "Mistress" added, apropos of nothing, "He needs a lang-shankit spoon that sups wi' the Devil." Even Alec, sounding like the drone on a bagpipes, said "Now you can get on with your own living, Jan," as if I hadn't been doing just that all along.

For a wake, it was most peculiar. No humorous anecdotes about the dearly departed, no toasts to his soul, only half-baked praise and a series of veiled warnings.

Thank goodness no one stayed long. After the last had gone, I insisted on doing the washing up, and this time Mrs. Marr let me. And then she, too, left. Where she went I wasn't to know. One minute she was there, and the next away.

I wondered at that. After all, this was her home, certainly more than mine. I was sure she'd loved my father who, God knows, was not particularly loveable. But she walked out the door clutching her big handbag, without a word more to me; not a goodbye or "I'll not be long," or anything. And suddenly, there I was, all alone in the house for the first time in years. It was an uncomfortable feeling. I am not afraid of ghosts, but that house fairly burst with ill will, dark and brooding. So as soon as I'd tidied away the dishes, I went out, too, though not before slipping the final journal into the pocket of my overcoat and winding a long woolen scarf twice around my neck.

THE EVENING WAS DRAWING IN SLOWLY, BUT THERE was otherwise a soft feel in the air, unusual for the middle of March. The East Neuk is like that—one minute still and the next a flanny wind rising.

I headed east along the coastal path, my guide the stone head of the windmill with its narrow, ruined vanes lording it over the flat land. Perhaps sentiment was leading me there, the memory of that adolescent kiss that Alec had given me, so wonderfully innocent and full of desire at the same time. Perhaps I just wanted a short, pleasant walk to the old Salt Pans. I don't know why I went that way. It was almost as if I were being called there.

For a moment I turned back and looked at the town behind me which showed, from this side, how precariously the houses perch on the rocks, like gannets nesting on the Bass.

Then I turned again and took the walk slowly, it was still only ten or fifteen minutes to the windmill from the town. No boats sailed on the Firth today. I could not spot the large yacht so it must have been in its berth. And the air was so clear, I could see the Bass and the May with equal distinction. How often I'd come to this place as a

child. I probably could still walk to it barefooted and without stumbling, even in the blackest night. The body has a memory of its own.

Halfway there, a solitary curlew flew up before me and as I watched it flap away, I thought how the townsfolk would have cringed at the sight, for the bird was thought to bring bad luck, carrying away the spirits of the wicked at nightfall.

"But I've not been wicked," I cried after it, and laughed. *Or at least not wicked for a year, more's the pity.*

At last I came to the windmill with its rough stones rising high above the land. Once it had been used for pumping seawater to extract the salt. Not a particularly easy operation, it took something like thirty-two tons of water to produce one ton of salt. We'd learned all about it in primary school, of course. But the days of the Salt Pans were a hundred years in the past, and the poor windmill had seen better times.

Even run down, though, it was still a lovely place, with its own memories. Setting back against the mill's stone wall, I nestled down and drew out the last journal from my coat pocket. Then I began to read it from the beginning as the light slowly faded around me.

Now, I am a focused reader, which is to say that once caught up in a book, I can barely swim back up to the surface of any other consciousness. The world dims around me. Time and space compress. Like a Wellsian hero, I am drawn into an elsewhere that becomes absolute and real. So as I read my Father's final journal, I was in his head and his madness so completely, I heard nothing around me, not the raucous cry of gulls nor the wash of water onto the stones far below.

So it was, with a start, that I came to the final page, with its mention of the goggle-eyed toad. Looking up, I found myself in the gray gloaming surrounded by nearly a hundred toads, all staring at me with their horrid goggle eyes, a hideous echo of my father's written words.

Looking up I found myself in the gray gloaming surrounded by nearly a hundred toads, all staring at me with their horrid goggle eyes, a hideous echo of my father's written words.

I stood up quickly, trying desperately not to squash any of the poor puddocks. They leaned forward like children trying to catch the warmth of a fire. Then their shadows lengthened and grew.

Please understand, there was no longer any sun and very little light. There was no moon overhead for the clouds crowded one on to the other, and the sky was completely curtained. So there should not have been any shadows at all. Yet, I state again—their shadows lengthened and grew. Shadows like and unlike the ones I had seen against my father's study walls. They grew into dark caped creatures, almost as tall as humans yet with those goggly eyes.

I still held my father's journal in my left hand, but my right covered my mouth to keep myself from screaming. My sane mind knew it to be only a trick of the light, of the dark. It was the result of bad dreams and just having put my only living relative into the ground. But the primitive brain urged me to cry out with all my ancestors, "Gauld iron!" and run away in terror.

And still the horrid creatures grew until now they towered over me, pushing me back against the windmill their shadowy fingers grabbing at both ends of my scarf.

Who are you? What are you? I mouthed, as the breath was forced from me. Then they pulled and pulled the scarf until they'd choked me into unconsciousness.

WHEN I AWOKE, I WAS TIED TO A WINDMILL VANE, MY hands bound high above me, the ropes too tight and well-knotted for any escape.

"Who are you?" whispered aloud this time, my voice sounding froglike, raspy, hoarse. "What are you?" Though I feared I knew and was afraid to be right. "What do you want of me? Why are you here?"

In concert, their voices wailed back. "A wind! A wind!"

And then in horror all that Father had written—about the hands and feet and sex organs of the corpse being cut off and attached to the dead cat—bore down upon me. Were they about to dig poor father's corpse up? Was I to be the offering? Were we to be combined in some sort of desecration too disgusting to be named? I began to shudder within my bonds, both hot and cold. For a moment I couldn't breathe again, as if they were tugging on the scarf once more.

Then suddenly, finding some latent courage, I stood tall and screamed at them, "I'm not dead yet." Not like my father whom they frightened to death.

They crowded around me, shadow folk with wide white eyes, laughing. "A wind! A wind!"

I kicked out at the closest one, caught my foot in its black cape, but connected with nothing more solid than air. Still, that kick forced them back for a moment.

"Get away from me!" I screamed. But screaming only made my throat ache, for I'd been badly choked just moments earlier. I began to cough and it was as if a nail were being driven through my temples with each spasm.

The shadows crowded forward again, their fingers little breezes running over my face and hair, down my neck, touching my breasts.

I took a deep breath for another scream, another kick. But before I could deliver either, I heard a cry.

"Aroint, witches!"

Suddenly I distinguished the sound of running feet. Straining to see down the dark corridor that was the path to Pittenweem, I leaned against the cords that bound me. It was a voice I did and did not recognize.

The shadow folk turned as one and flowed along the path, hands before them as if they were blindly seeking the interrupter.

"Aroint, I say!"

Now I knew the voice. It was Mrs. Marr, in full cry. But her curse seemed little help and I feared that she, too, would soon be trussed up by my side.

But then, from the east, along the path nearer town, there came another call.

"Janet! Janet!" This voice I recognized at once.

"Alec—" I said between coughs.

The shadows turned from Mrs. Marr and flowed back, surrounding him, but he held something up in his hand. A bit of a gleam from a crossbar. His fisherman's knife.

The shadows fell away from him in confusion.

"Gauld iron!" he cried at them. "Gauld iron!"

So they turned to go back again towards Mrs. Marr, but she reached into her large handbag and pulled out her steel knitting needles. Holding them before her in the sign of a cross, she echoed Alec's cry. "Gauld iron." And then she added, her voice rising as she spoke, "Oh let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end; but establish the just, for the righteous God trieth the hearts and reins."

I recognized it as part of a psalm, one of the many she'd presumably memorized as a child, but I could not have said which.

Then the two of them advanced on the witches, coming from east and west, forcing the awful crew to shrink down, as if melting, into dark puddocks once again.

Then step by careful step, Alec and Mrs. Marr herded the knot of toads off the path and over the cliff's edge.

Suddenly the clouds parted and a brilliant half moon shone down on us, its glare as strong as the lighthouse on Anster's pier. I watched as the entire knot of toads slid down the embankment, some falling onto the rocks and some into the water below.

Only when the last puddock was gone did Alec turn to me. Hold-

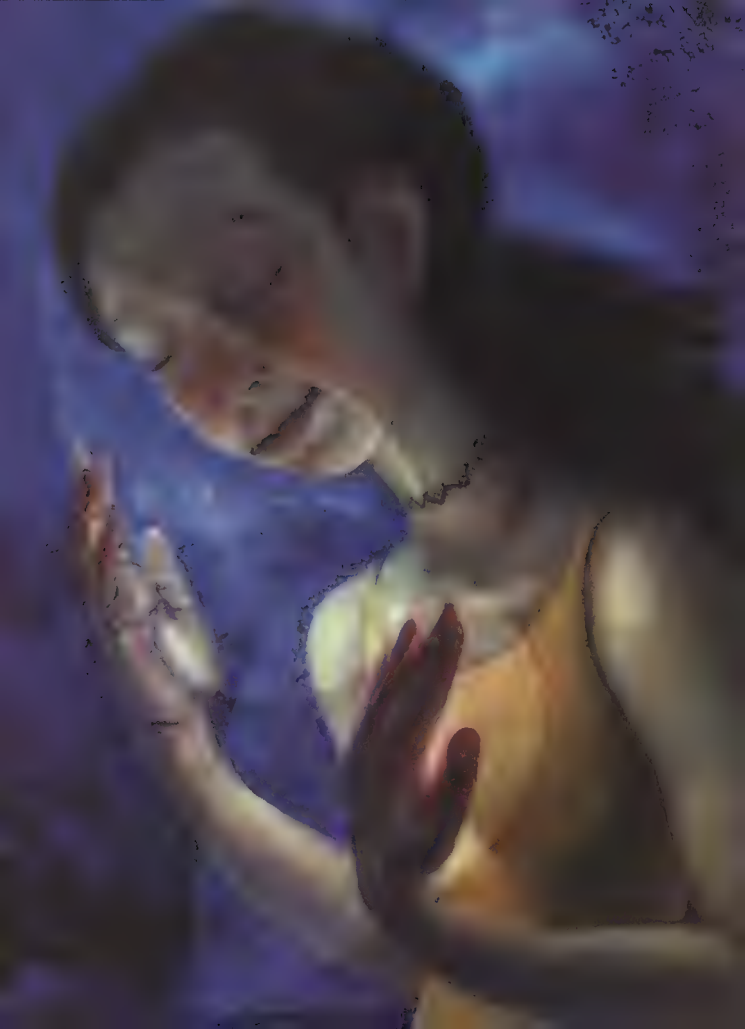
Continued on page 113

LAVENDER'S BLUE, LAVENDER'S GREEN

People hardly ever are what they seem to be, ***and*** *are almost never what they say they are. Almost*

"I didn't think Mum had any family," Bonnie said. ¶ I swung the car around the outcropping of rock that jutted out into the loch, keeping my eyes on the narrow road. ¶ "We never really talked about it." ¶ "Oh, *Dad*." ¶ I smiled. "This is your mum we're talking about." ¶ I wasn't watching her, but I knew Bonnie would be rolling her eyes at that. ¶ "Didn't you ever ask her?" she said. ¶ "Once." ¶ "And?" ¶ My voice dropped to a whisper that was almost lost behind the grumble of the car's engine. "She told me she was the queen of the fairies. I believed her." ¶ Another impatient roll of the eyes. Didn't kids believe in anything these days? We had believed everything. That had made it true, in every way that mattered. ¶ The woods thinned and drew away from the loch. The road began to rise away from the shore. ¶ "Wasn't there anyone?" Bonnie asked. "No family? You met Mum at Uni. How about at graduation? Didn't anyone come for her?" ¶ Both of my parents had been there, Dad dressed up like he was at a wedding or a funeral, his pride all buttoned into his one suit and almost bursting out. For once, he hadn't even said anything about the length of my hair. We'd all gone out for dinner together, me, my parents, Angela. Her parents, if she'd had them, weren't there. ¶ "There was someone," I said. "A brother." I had almost forgotten him. In fact, I had until now. ¶ "Does the queen of the fairies have a brother?" Bonnie asked. There was a touch of derision in her voice. She was upset. I didn't blame her. Her mum had just disappeared, without warning, only leaving a note. ¶ "We were young," I said. ¶ "Not that young."

BY PATRICK SAMPHIRE | ILLUSTRATION BY MELISSA FERREIRA



Bonnie was younger than Angela and I had been when we had met. She seemed so much older. We had been such kids.

The road curved up to meet clouds and a spattering of drizzle that was enough to dirty the windscreen but not enough to wipe clean.

Bonnie slumped down further into the passenger seat and fumbled for a CD.

"Jeez, Dad, didn't you bring anything decent?"

"Just put one in," I said.

She flipped open a case and slid the CD into the player.

"What *is* this?" she said as the music started.

"Marillion," I said. "Misplaced Childhood." A good choice.

"Don't you have anything from the last thirty years?"

"Doubt it." I could have told her that Misplaced Childhood came out in 1985. She would have said I was proving her point. It didn't seem worth it.

We didn't talk all the way up to the junction at Crianlarich. After ten minutes, I switched the windscreen wipers on and squirted water until they could clean the glass. I slid the car under the bridge, paused at the junction then pulled out left.

"Penny for your thoughts?" I said.

"You are so sad."

I blinked. "Okay..."

"You still believe it, don't you?"

"What?"

"That Mum was the queen of the fairies."

I shifted gear.

"Yes," I said. "I do."

"She isn't," Bonnie said. "She's just Mum."

My generation had dreamed. We had dreamed that the world might be a better place. We had dreamed of miracles. Sometimes I thought we had taken all the dreams and left nothing for these new generations. We were the selfish generation. We had wanted it all, so we had taken it, and we held onto it jealously.

We pulled into the Green Welly Stop at Tyndrum in the grey drizzle for a break and petrol.

"Stupid name," Bonnie grumbled, but she went in anyway.

I loitered by the sandwich counter until Bonnie had disappeared to the bathroom, then pulled out Angela's note again. *I have to go,* it read. *There are some things I need to sort out. I will come back.* Then there was an address.

I flipped the paper like I had a dozen times. There was nothing else on it. Not even my name.

I bought a couple of cheese sandwiches and, on a whim, a small bundle of dried lavender for the car. Then we set out again.

"Tell me about Mum's brother," Bonnie said.

"I don't remember much," I said. "I only met him that once. He was... tall. Black hair, like your mum's. Quiet."

"What did he do?"

"He was an engineer, I think," I said.

"An engineer."

"Yeah. On an oil platform." I smiled. He'd been big, solid, his skin hardened and reddened by the sea winds. Not exactly fairy material. "Anything else?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "The dead flowers stink."

We finally reached Tobermory around six. The weather had cleared during the ferry trip over from Oban, leaving patches of sunshine racing across the sound. We had driven slowly up the island, watching the liquid dapples of green tinted gold slip across Mull's mountains and hills.

The address on Angela's note was at the back of the town, up the hill near where the fields began.

I had expected something old, a low stone house, perhaps, with a thatch or slate roof. Instead, it was a late forties, maybe early fifties, concrete creation, its paint fresh but with a long crack down the front that had been patched with a smear of concrete that didn't match.

"Are we just going to walk in without any warning or anything?" Bonnie said, hunching her shoulders.

"Yep," I said. I turned off the engine and let the silence and stillness rest against my skin for a moment.

"That's so rude," Bonnie said.

I opened the door and climbed out, stretching my back. There was a light, damp wind that smelled faintly of salt and seaweed.

"Come on."

I started up the path to the gate in the hedge and heard Bonnie following.

The front door opened before we reached it. A slightly overweight but still beautiful older woman stepped out. I stopped, peering at her. Bonnie came to a halt beside me.

I could see Angela in this woman. She had the same liveliness of face, and although her hair was white, I could tell it would once have been as black and lush as Angela's.

She smiled as she saw us. "You must be Ralph and Bonnie. Come in. We've been expecting you."

I frowned. "Expecting us?"

"For years. Come on in. Eric's putting tea on."

"Angela told us so much about you both." Angela's mum poured tea into a series of small, floral, china cups. "It's wonderful to see you at last."

Bonnie and I exchanged a glance.

"She did?" I said.

"Oh, yes. Milk?"

"Thanks." I took my cup. "When? Sorry."

Angela's mum smiled. "Every Wednesday."

"Never missed a week," her dad said. "Not our Angie."

Bonnie was staring down at her tea. "We didn't know," she whispered.

"Angela always kept things to herself," her dad said.

I took a sip of my tea. Bonnie kept staring into hers, swirling it gently. We'd come all this way to—what?—find out about Angela, I guessed, but now I couldn't think of a thing to say. I didn't know these people. Angela and I had been married for twenty years and there was this whole vista of her life that I knew nothing about. I hadn't ever asked her about it, except that first time. Maybe I hadn't wanted to know, hadn't wanted the baggage.

"She's gone," I said.

"We thought she might have," Angela's mum said.

My fingers tightened on the delicate china.

Bonnie looked up. "Do you know where she went?" The hope in her voice was painful.

"No. We're sorry."

"Oh." Bonnie looked down into her tea again.

"You look like her," Angela's dad said. "Like she did when she went off to University."

Silence again. It made me want to get up and stride around, turn on a radio or something. I didn't know why the hell we were here.

I put the tea down. "I'm sorry," I said. "This was a mistake."

Angela's parents looked at each other. Her mother couldn't keep the disappointment from her face.

"Look, it's not that we—" I started. "It's just—" I shook my head. "You know, this is a bad time. We didn't know anything." I stopped again.

"When Angie went away," Angela's dad said, "we knew she'd never come back. We knew she'd meet someone and that would be her life. She's all or nothing. She always has been, ever since she was a little girl. Just like her brother."

"I guess," I said.

BOLD New Worlds

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Angela's mum got up. "It's true. When she was only five she decided she was a fairy." She pulled open a drawer in the dark-wood chest of drawers that stood opposite the window. "I made her these." She reached in and took out what seemed to be two small sheets of muslin stretched over frames of bent sticks. It took me a moment to realise what they must have been. "Fairy wings," her mum said. "She wore them every evening until she left home, even though the wood had snapped." She stared down at them and shook her head. "Our little girl."

They gave Bonnie Angela's old room. When she was done unpacking—in all of thirty seconds, I guessed she'd just emptied her bag onto the bed—she came and helped me.

"They're sweet," she said as she took one of my shirts and put it on a hanger. "Gran and Grandad. How come we don't know them?"

I don't know," I said.

"We should have."

"I know."

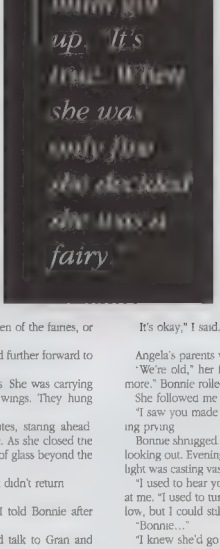
I closed my suitcase and sat on the bed. Bonnie came and sat next to me.

"None of this feels real," I said. "I know your mum must have come from somewhere. She must have had a family, friends, people she hated, a history. It's just—I never believed it. Now I'm here, and I still don't know if I believe it."

Bonnie looked at me for a long while. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. Then she said, "It's late, Dad. We should get some sleep."

After she had gone, I turned out the light and got undressed. I went to the window. It was a clear night, but there was no moon, so the fields and the stark hills that rose beyond them were dark. To the left, just beyond my line of sight, a yellow glow rose from the harbour and town.

Angela would have seen this view every night. It was passive, still, peaceful. A view to grow an imagination. How had she populated this view? Here was where she had dreamed and grown and become the woman I had married but never really known. The queen of the fairies, or just a girl who dreamed in the still darkness.



The house door cracked open below. I leaned further forward to peer down.

Bonnie stepped out into the star-lit blackness. She was carrying something. I squinted. Angela's broken fairy wings. They hung loose, diffidently from Bonnie's hand.

She stood in the darkness for several minutes, staring ahead. Then she turned and came back into the house. As she closed the door, I saw a glint of purple light like the edge of glass beyond the hedge.

I watched the night for a long time. The light didn't return.

"I'm going for a walk around town," I told Bonnie after breakfast. "Do you want to come?"

"Nah," she said. "I'm going to hang out and talk to Gran and Grandad."

"Okay," I said. It was good for her to know her grandparents. Me, I wasn't sure I was ready for that. I wasn't even sure I wanted to believe in them.

Before we left Kent, everyone told us it rained all the time in Scotland. Not today. Today was blisteringly hot. I walked through Tobermory's steep, twisted streets, feeling the sweat soak into my T-shirt, trying to imagine Angela as a kid walking or running through these streets, laughing or shouting. Whenever I passed someone middle-aged I couldn't help but stare at them and wonder if they had known Angela. There could be pieces of her in them, stories and memories and touches, things that would make her past real. As I walked, I was building a solidity to the Angela that had been that she had never had in my mind before. It made me sad and happy at the same time. The queen of fairies was slipping away and a girl was taking her place, like a dream fading into tangible reality when you wake.

About midday, I slipped into the cool darkness of a hotel on the harbor and ordered a glass of Laphroaig fifteen-year-old. It was slightly oaky with a lingering taste of the sea and a hint of peat smoke. I sipped it in an armchair in front of the cold fireplace.

When I was done, I crossed to the waterfront, sat on the quay, and watched the boats rock gently on the sun-silvered water.

I still didn't know what we were doing here.

I got back home in the middle of the afternoon. I'd been out in the sun too long. I could feel the prickle of sunburn above my collar and on my scalp.

Bonnie was sitting on a bench under an apple tree at the other end of the garden, talking to a tall lad who was leaning on a lawnmower. She had a book open on her lap but was making no move to read it. Angela's mother and father were weeding the flower border by the path together.

I nodded as I came in. "Who's he?" Trying not to sound like an overprotective father. Bonnie was seventeen.

"Jack," Angela's mum said. "He does odd jobs for us. Don't worry about him. He's a good boy. Not terribly bright, but a good boy."

"Angela and his father were sweet on each other at school," Angela's dad said.

"It didn't come to anything," her mum said. "They weren't meant to be together."

It's okay," I said. "I'm not about to get jealous."

Angela's parents went to bed at around nine again that night.

"We're old," her father said. "Can't keep up with you kids anymore." Bonnie rolled her eyes at me, and I tried not to glare at her.

She followed me up to my room.

"I saw you made a friend," I said, then cursed myself for sounding prying.

Bonnie shrugged. She crossed the room to the window and stood looking out. Evenings lasted long this far north. The last of the sunlight was casting vast elongated shadows across the fields and trees.

"I used to hear you and Mum arguing," Bonnie said, not looking at me. "I used to turn my music up and put my head under my pillow, but I could still hear you."

"Bonnie…"

"I knew she'd go. I knew it every day."

"It wasn't like that."

She turned abruptly. The light behind her was so bright I had to squint.

"Then what was it like?"

I lowered my gaze from the blaze of light. "Sometimes we got stressed. Work. Bills. You know."

Continued on page 112

New in the *New York Times* bestselling Redwall series by

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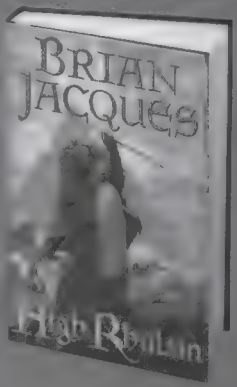

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May Justice win as the Redwall Adventures Continue

ACE

By Eric Baker

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire serves up gaming fun for all ages.

As in the book and the movie of the same name, the big draw in ***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire***, from Electronic Arts for the PC, Xbox, PS2, and Gamecube, are the levels set during the Tri Wizard tournament. Harry races a dragon on his broom, dives underwater, and battles a maze. The difference, of course, is that in the game the player guides "Harry" through all these things rather than just reading about them or watching them happen. It is up to the player to get Harry where he is supposed to end, but the controls and tasks are very forgiving. Even the youngest of Harry's fans should be able to complete each level without too much practice.

Overall, *HPatGoF* is a more action-oriented title than the previous games in the series. The players spend less time solving puzzles and uses more of their various magical abilities and items. Up to three players can play some levels of the game simultaneously, and on most of those levels all three characters will have to cooperate to get past the challenges. When there aren't enough humans around to direct the characters, the computer takes over whomever the player isn't controlling. Graphically, this the best game of the series. The frame rate is a little stronger and the graphics are a little cleaner, a little more detailed.

For all its charm and excitement, *HPatGoF*, like the other Harry Potter games before it, is not a game that is so good that it demands to be played for its own sake. *HPatGoF* is a game for people who can't get enough of Harry and who want a chance to experience him in yet another medium.

Speaking of games for fans, the TV series was called *Firefly*, but the movie and the paper and dice role-playing game are called ***Serenity***. The $40, full-color, hardcover book is by Margaret Weis and Jamie Chambers, two legendary names in the role-playing community, with ties going all the way back to the first editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The authors used all that experience to create a game that is true to Joss Whedon's vision, easy for new gamers to grasp and play, and exciting enough to keep new and old gamers coming back for more.

Electronic Arts has scheduled Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire *for a November 15th release date.*

All the rules and background are in the book. Which includes details on the guns, spaceships, and technology of Joss's "space western" universe. There are 15 sample characters, including the crew of *Serenity* herself, fully statted out, to help players who just want to jump into the action, but the rules for creating characters of the players' own are straightforward. The model for sessions of play is the episodes of the series: find a ship, find a job, keep flying. There is, however, enough information about the setting that campaigns can expand in other directions.

The mechanics of the game are based on the increasingly universal mechanic of task numbers. In most situations, the players will roll one die repre-

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senting their governing statistic and another die representing the skill they are employing. If the total of these dice is higher than the task number (set by the game master), then the player's character succeeds. What keeps the game open and story-focused is the plot point mechanic. Players earn plot points for doing things that are in keeping with their characters' "Traits." For example, if a character has the trait "Pacifist" (think of Kavlee on the show) and refuses to shoot someone even to defend his or her own life that would be worth plot points. The player can then turn around and use those points to modify the shooting rolls of the bad guys or even to buy a convenient plot happening that ends the danger without a fight.

How much fun any paper and dice role-playing game is ultimately depends on the game master running it and the players play-

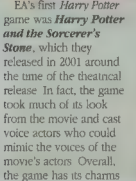
Stepping into Harry Potter's world.

Of the many games based on the *Harry Potter* novels, there have been good ones and bad ones released on a variety of media, from board, to Web, to computer to console. In that crowd of tie-ins, however, there are four video games from Electronic Arts that set the standard for modeling Harry's adventures in the non-written word and are still available to new fans or new fans of games. In addition, these games are ported to every active system on the market so they are playable no matter what console, computer, or portable device the *Harry* fan has access to.

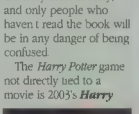
EA's first *Harry Potter* game was ***Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone***, which they released in 2001 around the time of the theatrical release. In fact, the game took much of its look from the movie and cast voice actors who could mimic the voices of the movie's actors. Overall, the game has its charms but there is no way around the fact that it was clearly intended for the youngest set of *Harry Potter* fans, and anyone with a little experience playing games that are more adult will quickly become frustrated with just how easy and repetitive the game's "challenges" are.

Continuing with a winning formula, ***Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*** debuted 2002. This game is a marked improvement over the previous one. It is structured in a more traditional quest/adventure style and is much more varied in its game play. It is also harder so that both *Harry Potter's* tweener fans, and new video game fans could play without becoming bored. More so than the first game, *CoS* let players relive the action scenes of the novel while giving the feeling of participating in them.

2004's ***Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*** is pretty much the same game as *CoS* with the important addition that Harry's friends Ron and Hermione are now playable characters. Each friend has their own spells and strengths, and many of the quests that are the heart of the main game can only be completed by combining Harry's athletic ability with Ron's eye for the hidden, and Hermione's ability to go where the boys can't. At the same time, this game follows the story more loosely, and only people who haven't read the book will be in any danger of being confused.

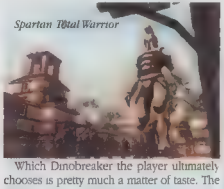


The *Harry Potter* game not directly tied to a movie is 2003's ***Harry Potter: Quidditch World Cup***. The best that can be said of this outing is that the developers tried to be true to the game as it is portrayed in the books. Succeeding in recreating the wild, high-speed chaos of a quidditch game might have been possible in an on-line multiplayer version, but *QWC* is for two players, and only one human player per team. The game that *QWC* models is interesting and can be competitive and enjoyable on its own terms, but it doesn't give the player the feeling of being "in the book" except during the cut scenes.



By Eric T. Baker

Sony Entertainment's Shadow of the Clossus



Spartan Total Warrior

ing it, but it is always better if everyone playing has a shared sense of what the world looks like and how the adventures are supposed to go With its *Firefly/Serenity* background, players of *Serenity* will be on the same page as they sit down at the table, and the game book itself provides the details needed to fill in the foggy corners For fans of the show, this *Serenity* is an excellent way to keep the adventure going

D.I.C.E.: DNA Integrated Cybernetic Enterprises from Bandai Games is a science fiction game aimed at younger players for the PS2 Based on the anime of the same name, *D.I.C.E.* is a fighting and racing game where the player takes the role of one of the characters from the show Each character has its own Dinobreaker mount The mounts are transformable robots in one form they are a vehicle and in the other they are a dinosaur The game makes use of each form as players race and fight their way through levels to reach a boss fight that unlocks the next level

Which Dinobreaker the player ultimately chooses is pretty much a matter of taste. The melee attacks are different and the vehicle forms handle differently, but the game itself can be completed with relative ease by any of them. The powerups that give the Dinobreakers ranged attacks make the fighting parts particularly straightforward The simplicity might bore adults but, the risk/reward/difficulty seems to be about right for the tweener age group that the game is aimed at. In addition the graphics are faithful to the anime, a very important consideration in a game of this sort

Shadow of the Clossus for the PS2 is a completely different kind of game that contains not giant robots but fantastic, incredible, frightening giants Thus is one of the most distinctive and (for the PS2) most cinematic games ever created. The hero, a young man with a sword, sets out on his horse to battle a dozen giants for the life of his beloved. These battles are not like the typical battles found in

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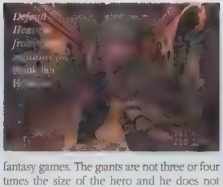

fantasy games. The giants are not three or four times the size of the hero and he does not jump about avoiding clumsy strikes while dashing in to make combo hits of his own

In *SotC*, the giants are hundreds of feet tall In the distance they fill the horizon. Up close, there is room for only part of a limb or a trunk or a head on the screen The first thing the hero has to do is find them, which takes longer than their size might make one think Then he has to use his bow and his sword to kill them Turns out that each giant has a vulnerable spot, but reaching it usually means actually climbing up the colossus while it thunders around and shakes and swats and generally tries to smash the hero like the gnat he is in comparison The game has a health bars for the hero and the giant, but its most important scale is the gnp meter, which tracks how close the colossus is to shaking the hero loose and flinging him to his death

The most difficult part about creating video games is making them just hard enough. Players never have more fun than when their characters are close to dying, but they don't actually want the characters to die It is that fighting on the edge and winning out experience that gives the buzz of accomplishment that is the payoff of games *SotC* keeps the character right on the edge of failure, and boy does it feel good when one of those monsters goes down

A completely different take on keeping the player close to the edge is employed by Sega s ***Spartan: Total Warrior*** Although both games focus on one man with a sword, *SotC* has players focus on one incredibly huge problem while *S TW* throws lots of problems at the player at once. Players don't just get to knock down the siege towers, they have to protect the king while they re at it and dump pitch on the sappers, too These deeds and lots of others are done in the role of a Spartan warrior in a mythologically active past where the Romans can attack cities with the aid of summoned gods, medusas can power cannons, and the player's character has access to "rage" fueled special attacks

The programmers at Creative Assembly, the company that designed *S TW*, are best known for their *Total War* series of PC games. These historical wargames are famous for the number and detail of the soldiers they depict on the screen at once, and this expertise is much on display in *S.TW*. Even though the player controls only one man, and even though many bosses and speciu. units have to be

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faced, the core of the game pitches the Spartan against dozens of soldiers at time It is a rare battle that doesn't conclude with a screen full of the bodies of the fallen

Speaking of screens full of bodies, ***Painkiller: Hell Wars*** for the Xbox from Dreamcatcher Interactive is a port of the earlier PC game and its sequel For those who never played the PC version, *PK: HW* is a low-cost high-value option because it contains the best levels from the earlier games plus five new single-player and five new multiplayer maps. In addition, being on the Xbox means that it takes just a few clicks to get on Xbox live and find 15 other players to fight out the multiplayer games

The game itself is a first person shooter As the game opens, its hero is dead, but instead of being sent to Hell, he is trapped in a sort of purgatory where he must defend Heaven from Hell's forces He does this with an array of weird and savage weapons, each with two fire modes The graphics are a notch down from their PC quality, but still great for a console. The physics engine makes all the blood, explosions, and deaths "real" enough to be satisfying, and the variety of demonic foes is great enough to keep the single-player mode from growing stale

A first-person shooter of a different sort is Sony's PS2 game, ***Ratchet: Deadlocked***, the fourth game in the popular *Ratchet and Clank* series. Clank is pretty much out of this one, and Ratchet is in cyborg armor, but in most other respects the game is in line with its predecessors Based on feedback, the designers found that the more players could do to customize the game, the more they liked it. Thus, this time the game has two more multiplayer modes, each with several options, and the players can customize both their skins and their loadouts In one mode they can even customize their powerups, as a team, as a reward for conquest.

In both the single- and multiplayer games the area where customizing comes on strongest is the weapons Weapon modifications are either earned for finishing 80 missions or purchased from the shop interface Modifications either change the basic characteristics of the weapon such as its range, or damage, or cycle time, or they add completely new powers to the weapons such as fire damage or a secondary area effect It simply isn't possible to try all the combinations in one time through the game but players will certainly have fun trying. ■

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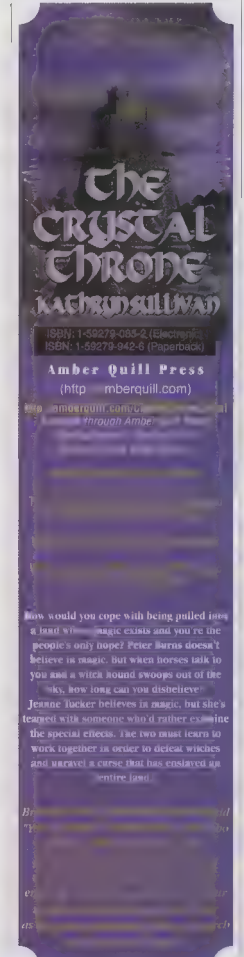
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Empty Spaces

Continued from page 74

It was the fourth day of their return journey. They had made camp once more at the highest point of the pass, looking out over the plains of Wylandia. Once more he had been summoned from a sound sleep, only this time, when he glanced back at the fire, he was a little relieved to see that he was not, in fact, still sleeping.

Even so, Timon was waiting for him on the ridge. The magician didn't say anything at first. He just stood looking out on the distant plain and a sky full of stars.

"If you're ready to kill me now, just do it. No suggestions for jumping off a cliff in the morning or any of that nonsense. Please do me the courtesy of being direct."

He sensed rather than saw the magician smile. "I am always direct … in my fashion. I see you burned the letter."

"Yes." Jayn wasn't surprised that Timon knew all about that, though he knew he should have been.

"Why?"

"If you already know what was in the letter, then you know why."

Timon sighed. "That's just it—I do know what was in the letter, and I don't know why you burned it. I want you to tell me. I think it's important."

"If that's true, first tell me what the letter said."

"I don't know," Timon said simply.

Jayn put his hands on his hips. "You just said— "

"—that I know what was in the letter. I did and I do. It was the letter of an unhappy young woman reaching out to an old friend. Am I wrong?"

Jayn thought about it. "No. You're not wrong. All right. I burned the letter because it was dangerous to keep it."

"Dangerous for whom?"

"For me, for all concerned … all right, for her especially if it came into the hands of her lord the king, who is not noted for his compassion. It's best this way."

Timon nodded. "Because the old friend she was reaching out to was a former playmate who today happens to be the heir of Morushe. Yes, you were right to burn it. But doing the right thing is not part of your reputation."

"Nor yours, if I may say, yet I have to ask this. Did you send me there to steal that letter? Was that silly gift just the pretext?"

For a moment the magician acted as if he hadn't heard. When he spoke again it was as if he were speaking on another subject entirely. "Like the Wylandian Dun breeding stock itself, there are many admirable traits of the royal bloodline of Wylandia: they tend to be brave, and honest, and shrewd. They also tend to be bad-tempered and stubborn."

"Pardon me, magician, but this is well known, though there are few who would say as much to their faces, and certainly not the current king."

Timon smiled. "So if, perhaps, one wished to affect a change in their behavior, one might look for more indirect methods?"

Jayn thought about this. "Such as?"

"Such as preventing a misunderstanding between a young married couple from turning into something more intractable. Such as leaving a sweet and thoughtful gift which the king himself forgot to do, on the occasion of the birth of his heir. Such as, in the face of that gift, a queen might, perhaps, reconsider her harsh appraisal of her new husband and treat him with a little more patience. Such that the king, in turn, might come to know his queen a little better and in turn treat her with more of the gentleness she needs and deserves."

"The smallest seeds grow the mightiest trees," Jayn said, repeating an old proverb.

"Not always," Timon said, "but everything large or small has to start somewhere." He shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe the new prince of Wylandia will grow up to be a mite less of a bellicose bastard than his father. One can but hope."

"How did you know that I would steal that letter? For that matter, how did you know about the letter in the first place and the possible consequences?"

The magician didn't answer directly. "You were born with a talent for moving quietly and tricking locks. So you became a thief. It would have been strange if you had not, yes?"

"True, but I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Just that it's the same for me, Jayn. Hidden things, remember? I was born with the talent to see the places where history turns. It's not that I want to—I have to. There came a time when I could no longer ignore what I saw for good or ill."

"So it was all preordained?" Jayn asked. He sounded bitter.

"Don't confuse possibility with destiny, Jayn. I knew about the letter, yes, and how it might fall into the wrong hands. I did not know for certain that you would take it."

"What if I hadn't?"

Timon shrugged. "Then you wouldn't have been the man I judged you."

Jayn looked out toward the stars. "You're not what everyone supposes you to be, Timon the Black."

"For that matter, neither are you. No surprise. It's not 'everyone' who gets to decide who a man is. Still, for reputation's sake I'll keep your secret if you'll keep mine. Agreed?"

"Agreed. Shall we swear binding oaths?" Jayn asked, smiling.

The magician smiled too. "No need. I trust you." ❧

THE STORY SO FAR

Continued from page 26

Albus Dumbledore.

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (2002), the second film directed by Chris Columbus, introduces Dobby, a house elf who appears in the Dursley home to warn 12-year-old Harry that he must not return to Hogwarts. Even though Harry's uncle bars the windows, he's no match for the Weasley brothers and their flying car, which they use to break Harry free.

When shopping for school supplies, Harry meets this year's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Gilderoy Lockhart (played by Kenneth Branagh), a pompous fame hound. Harry also meets Draco's father, Lucius Malfoy (played by Jason Isaacs), who makes a point of belittling the Weasleys for their poverty and Hermione for being a Mudblood—a child of Muggles (ordinary people who have no magical powers).

At Hogwarts, a mysterious message written in blood warns that the Chamber of Secrets has been opened again. We learn that 1000 years ago, one of Hogwarts original founders, Slytherin, believed the school should accept only students of pure witch and wizard blood. Slytherin built a secret chamber that was opened 50 years ago. It's said there's a monster in the chamber, and only the rightful heir of Slytherin can control that monster.

To Harry's chagrin, he discovers he can speak Parseltongue, the language of snakes, which is a rare skill that Slytherin had. He wonders if this could mean he's related to Slytherin in some way.

Thanks to the ghost Moaning Myrtle, who died in the girls' bathroom many years ago, Harry gets his hands on a mysterious book: the diary of Tom Marvolo Riddle, a former Hogwarts student. After Harry writes questions in the diary, it shows him the past, which indicates that Hagrid was the Hogwarts student who opened the chamber 50 years ago and was responsible for a student's death.

Dobby continues to show up and warn Harry to leave Hogwarts. Someone steals Tom Riddle's diary, and a few students are found petrified, including Hermione. Lucius Malfoy arrives with an order to suspend Professor Dumbledore of his duties as head of Hogwarts, and Hagrid is taken away to Azkaban prison.

Harry and Ron follow a trail of clues until they realize the student killed at Hogwarts 50 years ago was Moaning Myrtle, and they discover how to get into the Chamber of Secrets. They also learn that Ron's younger sister Ginny has been kidnapped and taken into the chamber—and Professor Lockhart is given the task of rescuing her.

However, it turns out that Lockhart is a fraud. He's won his fame by taking credit for deeds done by other wizards and then cast memory spells to make them forget. Harry and Ron defeat Lockhart before he can cast a spell on them, but an avalanche inside the chamber separates Harry and Ron.

Harry pushes forward to find an unconscious Ginny at the feet of Tom Marvolo Riddle, who says he's a memory stored in the diary. However, we soon learn that the letters in his name can be rearranged to spell "I am Lord Voldemort." Tom Riddle was a student at Hogwarts 50 years ago but was embarrassed by his Mudblood name and changed it to Lord Voldemort.

After killing the monster in the Chamber of Secrets, Harry destroys the memory of Tom Riddle—even though the spirit of Lord Voldemort escapes once again. Harry rescues Ginny and learns it was Lucius Malfoy who slipped the diary of Tom Riddle into Ginny's school supplies and used her to wreak havoc at Hogwarts. Everyone who has been petrified by the roaming monster from the Chamber of Secrets, including Hermione, is returned to life.

Professor Dumbledore returns to Hogwarts, and Hagrid is freed from Azkaban prison, finally proven innocent after all these years thanks to Harry. Dumbledore comforts Harry by telling him, it isn't the abilities that show who we are, but the choices that we make.

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (2004) begins its journey into a darker realm under the direction of Alfonso Cuaron. Before the new school year begins, 13-year-old Harry learns that a dangerous criminal, Sirius Black (played by Gary Oldman), has escaped from Azkaban prison. Black is an alleged supporter of Voldemort, and he's the first prisoner to ever escape this infamous prison.

Ron's father warns Harry that he's in great danger, because Black lost everything twelve years ago when Harry survived the attack and Voldemort died. Harry is all that stands between Voldemort's return to power, so Black wants to kill Harry.

On the train to Hogwarts, Harry and his friends share a compartment with the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Lupin (played by David Thewlis). They also have their first encounter with a Dementor, these terrifying creatures are used as prison guards at Azkaban, and they're searching for Black. They'll be staking out Hogwarts until Black is captured.

At school, Professor Dumbledore (now played by Michael Gambon, after the death of Richard Harris) announces the retirement of the professor of the Care of Magical Creatures—the new teacher is Hagrid, now eligible for promotion, thanks to his vindication from Harry in the previous movie.

We meet Professor Trelawney (played by Emma Thompson), the doom-and-gloom teacher of Divination. She soon sees an omen of death for Harry. Strangely, Hermione pops in and out while seeming to be taking far more classes than possible, since many of them are offered at the same time of day.

Signs crop up that Black is getting closer to Hogwarts and may have infiltrated the school. At the same time, the Dementors try to suck the life out of Harry whenever he encounters one. He turns to Professor Lupin for help, who explains that Dementors feed off the tragedy in people's lives. Lupin says that because Harry has experienced far more hardship than any of his classmates, the Dementors feed off that. Lupin teaches Harry how to protect himself with a spell.

Harry soon learns that Black was once a friend of his parents, but he killed Peter Pettigrew, who tried to protect them from Voldemort. Not only that, but Black is Harry's godfather. Enraged that Black was a friend who betrayed his parents, Harry vows to kill him.

A mysterious black dog grabs and drags Ron, who is holding his pet rat Scabbers, down below the Whomping Willow tree on school grounds. When Harry and Hermione follow, they find Ron being held captive by Sirius Black, who has the power to change into the shape of a black dog. Professor Lupin soon joins them, and they're horrified to learn he's in league with Black. The men explain that Ron's rat Scabbers is actually Peter Pettigrew, and he's the one who betrayed Harry's parents, not Black—he's just the one who was blamed for it. In fact, Lupin and Black were the best friends of Harry's father.

However, outside in the moonlight, Professor Lupin can't help turning into a werewolf, and Black must transform himself into a dog to protect Harry and his friends. Ultimately, the Dementors come after them, and Black is arrested, soon to be executed.

Thanks to Dumbledore's advice, Hermione leads Harry back into the past day—we learn she has a Time Turner, a device she's been using all year to go back in time in order to attend conflicting school courses. Hermione and Harry influence events so they're able to rescue Black and send him to safety.

Black offers to let Harry live with him one day, telling him that the ones who love us never really leave us—all Harry has to do is look for them in his heart.

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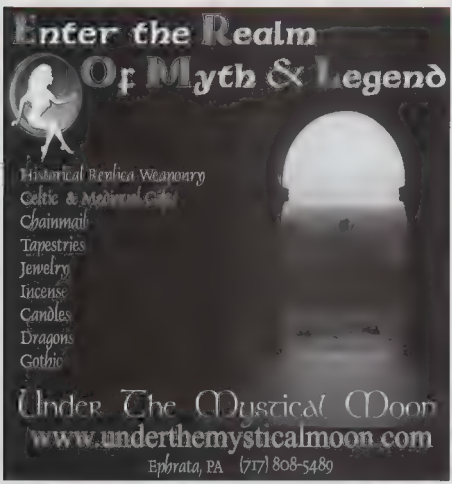


Continued from page 54

put them in the basket, put it on his back, and took the bones home to his wife

The ballad of "The Cruel Mother" identifies bread (as well as milk) with the comforts of a realized mother/child relationship. In the ballad, a young unwed girl goes to the forest alone and gives birth to two illegitimate children. She is high-born and must hide her pregnancy. Deep in the forest

She lent her back unto a thorn,
And she's got her twa bonny boys born
She's taen the ribbons frae her hair,
Bound their bodyes fast and sair
She's put them aneath a marble stane
Thinking a maiden to gae hame

Returning home, she looks out over the wall of her father's castle and sees two little children playing ball. Her heart filled with guilt and longing, she calls out to them

O bonny babies, if ye were mine,
I would feed you with the white bread and wine
I would feed you wi the ferra cow's milk,
And dress you in the finest silk

The ghosts of her children call back, replying

O cruel mother when we were thine
We saw none of your bread and wine
We saw none of your ferra cou's milk,
Nor wore we of your finest silk

Admitting her wrongdoing (as much to herself as to the children), she then asks what kind of punishment awaits her. The children reply matter of factly that she is to serve 28 purgatorial years as punishment

Seven years a fowl in the woods,
Seven years a fish in the floods
Seven years to be a church bell
Seven years a porter in hell

It's tempting to read these images as related to her crime. Perhaps the fowl represents the manner of the children's death in the woods, like hunted birds. Are fish lost in the "flood" of the afterlife? As a church bell she would hear the singing of the churchgoers, call them to pray, but would be ever isolated from the rites of the church. A porter in hell surely speaks for itself: not quite in hell, not quite out of it. However tempted we are to interpret them individually, what all of these images share is a liminal quality. Like souls of children dying before their time, they are of and not of this world. In any event, the milk, bread, and wine also serve here as (withheld) images of comfort, acceptance, and redemption no longer available to the abandoned and unshriven dead.

In the tale of "Black Robin" from North Wales, there is a reference to the use of bread to indicate the guilt of a suspect. At the well of Llanbedrog, you kneel, then throw a piece of bread into the well while naming a list of suspects. When the bread sinks, it means you've uttered the name of the guilty

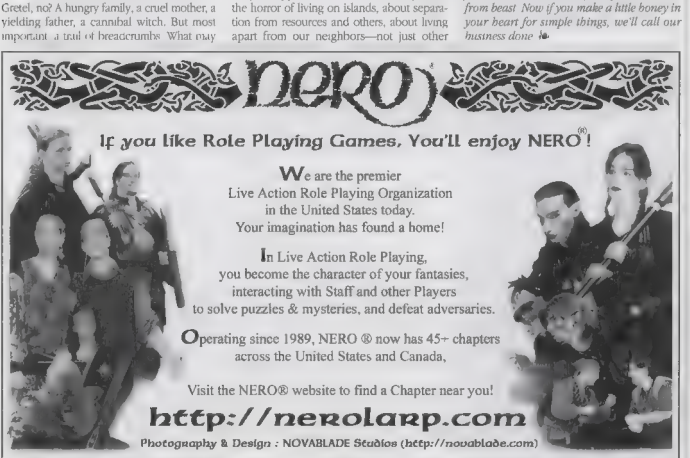
More references from Wales include the Breconshire belief that the Tylwyth Teg make gifts of bread to the peasantry that transform into toadstools the following morning. To avoid this, the bread was eaten in silence and darkness. In the well-known tale of The Shepherd of Myddvai, a mortal man has to give the gift of bread to a fairy woman to prove his worth. He makes bread for her twice, trying to catch her. Once is "hard-baked," another, "Unbaked." But when he finds bread along the shore of the lake (below which the faeries live,) she accepts it. However, it is a marriage doomed from the first, for she tells him that if he ever strikes her, she'll return home to her people. Needless to say, he strikes her three times and she departs but not before blessing their children and thus giving rise to a family of the greatest healers Wales has ever known. Bread seals the bargain, but perhaps the marriage isn't the point. It's about an exchange across the threshold that eventually leads to a bloodline receiving an otherworldly skill that will serve the community down through the ages. The marriage was never meant to last, only to serve as a vehicle. The contract won by the gift of bread, the gift of one body to another across the veil of worlds, brings all this about.

Everyone knows the tale of Hansel and Gretel, no? A hungry family, a cruel mother, a yielding father, a cannibal witch. But most important a trail of breadcrumbs. What may we make of this? Bread as a path? As an offering to the forest? The breadcrumbs are eaten by birds and the children become lost. They follow a white bird to the house of a witch with an appetite, and they nibble at her house like little mice, hunger driving them (like their parents) to destroy a home. The witch feeds them, keeps them for a snack, but is tricked by Gretel, who pushes her into the oven. So the witch learns a lesson too: never turn you back on a hungry kid. The witch vanquished, the children fill their pockets with treasure and head home helped by another bird (this time a duck) that carries them across the river. They return to their parents' house and there is much rejoicing.

But what shall we make of the meaning of bread in this story? Lack of it breaks the family? Those who hoard food should be tricked and killed? A little bread given to a bird goes a long way? Frankly, I've never liked (nor really understood) the story, although the image of leaving breadcrumbs—of starving people using good food to mark their path—has stayed with me for its absurdity if nothing else. Where were the family's neighbors? Could no one spare that family a crumb? Or take the children in until things got better? And don't get me started on the roles relegated to old women in fairy tales. I think the story is supposed to tell us something about the horror of living on islands, about separation from resources and others, about living apart from our neighbors—not just other humans, but the animals with which we share the stoned land.

As we've seen, bread, milk, and honey symbolize the health not only of the land, but of the communal ties of those who live upon it. Each one of these simple foods embodies a different aspect of community and communion—bees and village, milk and mothers, bread and grain and harvest and the journey of the rising year. In the Irish tale of "The Voyage of Maleduin," his boat, which has been rowing about in the otherworld of the sea for a long time, comes to the island of Mill, where the voyagers are witness to a purgatorial procession: lines of people with sacks upon their backs walking toward an enormous mill, each sack filled with all the grain the people of the world begrudgingly kept from others. Hell indeed. In all the lore relating to food, we learn that it must be freely given to both gods and all our neighbors, living and dead and in-between. We make a home wherever goodness and simple gifts are freely given to others.

What more might I tell you? Perhaps you wish to know why bread always falls butter side down? The great mysteries such as this—the reason you have no doubt been reading all this time—I leave untold for night is done and dawn comes early to the breakfast table. Here is bread from fire, and milk from beast. Now if you make a little honey in your heart for simple things, we'll call our business done. ❧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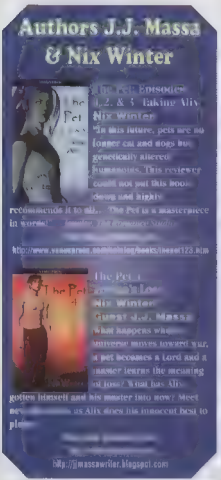

lavender's blue

continued from page 100

"And you didn't even know about her family You didn't know she talked to them every week. You didn't know where she came from."

"I knew she was from Mull—"

"You didn't know where she came from." I dropped onto the bed.

"She didn't tell me."

"You didn't *ask*."

"I did."

"Once. Just once."

"She'll come back," I said. "Her note said so. You saw it."

Bonnie came across from the room and lowered herself into a crouch before me. "But she has to have a reason to stay, Dad."

I heard the outside door open then close again as I lay in bed that night. I didn't get out of bed to look.

If there were lights again, I didn't see them.

"Jack's going to show me around," Bonnie said at breakfast. She looked at me. "If that's okay?"

"Of course," I said, not knowing if I meant it.

"Cool," Bonnie said. "Then I'm going to get changed."

"Just like her mum," Angela's mother said when Bonnie had gone.

"Really?" I said.

"Oh, yes," her father said. "She was always running around with her friends. We hardly saw her some summers."

"Off with the fairies, we used to say," her mum said.

I frowned. "The fairies?"

"Our joke. She and her friends used to gather down by the water, at the end of town, when the weather was fine. Otherwise, they'd be in someone's house. They were good kids."

"Right," I said. More pieces of reality sliding in, nudging my dreams aside.

"You never came to visit us," I said.

Angela's mum shrugged. "Eric doesn't travel well. And it's a long way."

"So," Angela's dad said, pushing aside his cup of tea. "What will you do today?"

"I think I'll take a walk again," I said. "It's a beautiful place."

I went down to the harbour again and waited there until the hotel bar opened. It was empty this early. I took a stool at the bar.

"Did you know Angela MacEachern?" I asked the barman.

His eyes focused on me. "I did."

"What was she like?"

He squinted at the question. "She was… fine. Normal." He smiled. "She was in the year below me. I asked her to a dance once. She said she didn't dance. It was kind of her, but I knew she was sweet on another."

I nodded. *Normal.*

"Tell me," I said, and took a mouthful of whisky. "Do you have stories about fairies here?"

The barman nodded. "Of course. All the islands have stories." He shrugged. "I'm the wrong generation to ask about them. The old folk know the stories better."

"How was one supposed to see them?"

"See them?" The barman wiped his cloth along the bar, cleaning away the ring my glass had left. "A gift, I think. You had to bring them a gift."

I waited until Angela's parents had gone into the house to make dinner. Then I went to the car and took out the dried lavender. I sat on the bench under the apple tree and crumbled the flowers.

"A gift," I whispered, as I scattered the flowers. "A gift."

No one came. Eventually, I went in for dinner.

Bonnie sat on the edge of my bed. "What's up, Dad?"

I turned to her. My face felt numb.

"Your mum was never the queen of the fairies," I said.

"I know."

"Why did she go away?" The words squeezed up my throat like stones.

"When she told you that," Bonnie said. "When she told you she was the queen of the fairies, it was just a joke, just a childhood game. You treated her like it was true. I think she just wanted to be treated like a normal woman."

"She never said."

"Yes, she did," Bonnie said. "That's why we're here. This is her saying it in a way that you would believe."

I swallowed, felt the stones sink away. Normal. That was fine. That was just fine.

From my darkened room, I watched out the window. The stars were high, sharp points in a depthless sky. The fields were pooled with blackness.

Below, the door cracked open. In the denseness of the night, Bonnie came out of the house and waited, broken wings in her hand, staring away over the hedge and the fields and the hills. Shattered purple lights gathered in a firefly swirl around her, and she began to walk forwards.

The boy, Jack, stepped out of the shadow of the hedge. The lights rushed to surround him. In their sharp light, the king of the fairies took my daughter's hand. Even in my bedroom, I smelled lavender.

We left the next morning, promising to return soon. It was early and I was tired, but we had a long way to drive and I wanted to be home when Angela came home.

In the seat next to me, Bonnie hummed a bright tune. ❧

a knot of toads

continued from page 95

ing the knife in his teeth, he reached above my head to my bound hands and began to untie the first knot.

A wind started to shake the vanes and for a second I was lifted off my feet as the mill tried to grind, though it had not done so for a century.

"Stop!" Mrs. Marr's voice held a note of desperation.

Alec turned. "Would ye leave her tied, woman? What if those shades come back again. I told ye what the witches had done before. It was all in the old man's journals."

"No, Alec," I cried, hating myself for trusting the old ways, but changed beyond caring. "They're elfknots."

"Aye," Mrs. Marr said, coming over and touching Alec's arm. "The lass is still of St. Monan's though she talks like a Sassanach." She laughed. "It's no the drink and the carousing that brings the wind. That's just for fun. No the corpse and the cat. That's just for show. My man told me. It's the knots, he says."

"The knot of toads?" Alec whispered hoarsely.

The wind was still blowing and it took Alec's hard arms around me to anchor me fast or I would have gone right around, spinning with the vanes.

Mrs. Marr came close till we were eye to eye. "The knots in the rope, lad," she said. "One brings a wind, two bring a gale, and the third . . ." She shook her head. "Ye dinna want to know about the third."

"But. . ." Alec began.

"Och, but me know buts, my lad. Cut between," Mrs. Marr said. "Just dinna untie them or King George's yacht at South Queensferry will go down in a squall, with the king and queen aboard, and we'll all be to blame."

He nodded and slashed the ropes with his knife, between the knots, freeing my hands. Then he lifted me down. I tried to take it all in: his arms, his breath on my cheek, the smell of him so close. I tried to understand what had happened here in the gloaming. I tried until I started to sob and he began stroking my hair, whispering, "There, lass, it's over. It's over."

"Not until we've had some tea and burned those journals," Mrs. Marr said. "I told ye we should have done it before."

"And I told ye," he retorted, "that they are invaluable to historians."

"Burn them," I croaked, knowing at last that the invitation in Latin they contained was what had called the witches back. Knowing that my speaking the words aloud had brought them to our house. Knowing that the witches were Father's "visitants" who had, in the end, frightened him to death. "Burn them. No historian worth his salt would touch them."

Alec laughed bitterly. "I would." He set me on my feet and walked away down the path toward town.

"Now ye've done it," Mrs. Marr told me. "Ye never were a lass to watch what ye say. Ye've injured his pride and broken his heart."

"But. . ." We were walking back along the path, her hand on my arm, leading me on. The wind had died and the sky was alert with stars. "But he's not an historian."

"Ye foolish lass, yon lad's nae fisherman, for all he dresses like one. He's a lecturer in history at the University, in St. Andrews," she said. "And the two of ye the glory of this village. Yer father and his father always talking about the pair of ye. Hoping to see ye married one day, when pride dicdna keep the two of ye apart. Scheming they were."

I could hardly take this in. Drawing my arm from her, I looked to see if she was making a joke. Though in all the years I'd known her, I'd never heard her laugh.

She glared ahead at the darkened path. "Yer father kept yer room the way it was when ye were a child, though I tried to make him see the foolishness of it. He said that someday yer own child would be glad of it."

"My father. . ."

"But then he went all queer in the head after Alec's father died. I think he believed that by uncovering all he could about the old witches, he might help Alec in his research. To bring ye together. Though what he really fetched was too terrible to contemplate."

"Which do you think came first?" I asked slowly. "Father's summonsing the witches, or the shadows sensing an opportunity?"

She gave a bob of her head to show she was thinking, then said at last, "Dinna mess with witches and weather, my man says. . ."

"Your man?" I was puzzled. "But I thought you were in love with my father."

She stopped dead in her tracks and turned to me. The half moon lit her face. "Yer father?" She stopped, considered, then began again. "Yer father had a heart only for two women in his life, yer mother and ye, Janet, though he had a hard time showing it.

"And. . ." she laughed, "he was no a bonnie man."

I thought of him lying in his bed, his great prow of a nose dominating his face. No, he was not a bonnie man.

"But I had promised yer mother on her deathbed to take care of him, and how could I go back on such a promise? I didna feel free to marry as long as he remained alive. Now my Pittenweem man and I have set a date, and it will be soon. We've wasted enough time already."

I had been wrong, so wrong, and in so many ways I could hardly comprehend them all. And didn't I understand about wasted time. But at least I could make one thing right again.

"I'll go after Alec, I'll. . ."

Mrs. Marr clapped her hands. "Then run, lass, run like the wind."

And untying the knot around my own pride, I ran.

For M. R. James

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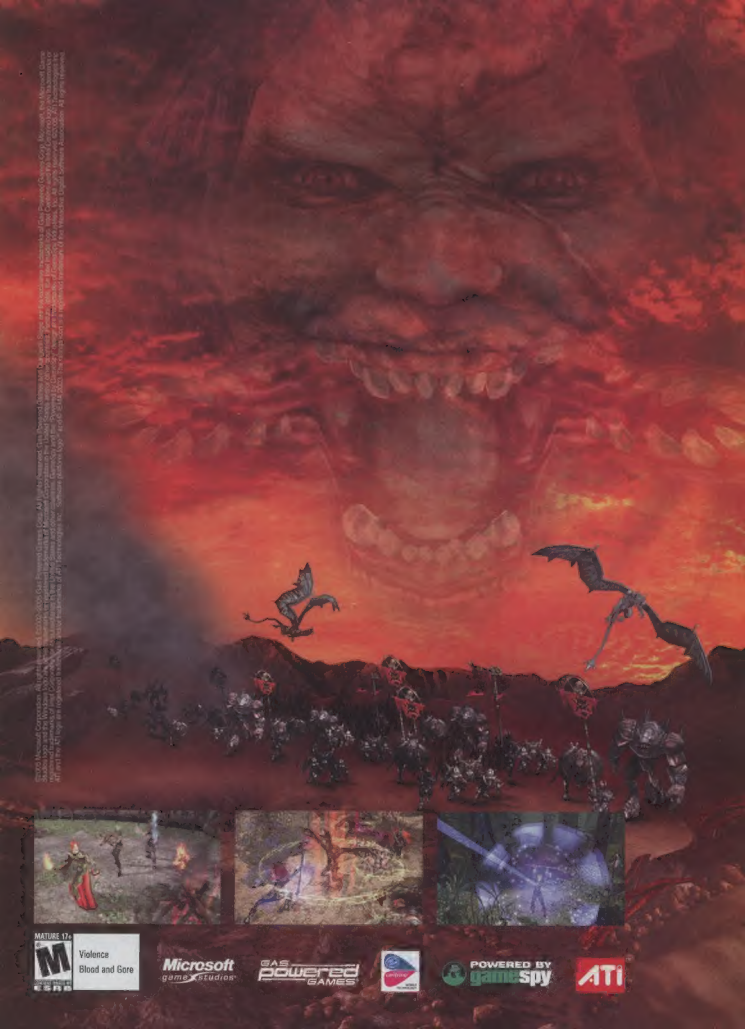
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